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GABORIAU'S SENSATIONAL NOVELS.

X.

THE

COUNT'S MILLIONS.

By ÉMILE GABORIAU.

IN TWO VOLS.—VOL. I.

TWENTIETH THOUSAND.

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THE COUNT'S MILLIONS.

PART I.

PASCAL AND MARGUERITE.

I.

It was a Thursday evening, the fifteenth of October; and although only half-past six o'clock, it had been dark for some time already. The weather was cold, and the sky was as black as ink, while the wind blew tempestuously, and the rain fell in torrents.

The servants at the Hôtel de Chalusse, one of the most magnificent mansions in the Rue de Courcelles in Paris, were assembled in the porter's lodge, a little building comprising a couple of rooms standing on the right hand side of the great gateway. Here, as in all large mansions, the "concierge" or porter, M. Bourigeau, was a person of immense importance, always able and disposed to make any one who was inclined to doubt his authority, feel it in cruel fashion. As could be easily seen, he held all the other servants in his power. He could let them absent themselves without leave, if he chose, and conceal all returns late at night after the closing of public balls and wine-shops. Thus, it is needless to say that M. Bourigeau and his wife were treated by their fellow-servants with the most servile adulation.

The owner of the house was not at home that evening, so that M. Casimir, the count's head valet, was serving coffee for the benefit of all the retainers. And while the company sipped the fragrant beverage which had been generously tinctured with cognac, provided by the butler, they all united in abusing their common enemy, the master of the house. For the time being, a pert little waiting-maid, with an odious turn-up nose, had the floor. She was addressing her remarks to a big, burly, and rather insolent-looking fellow, who had been added only the evening before to the corps of footmen. "The place is really intolerable," she was saying. "The wages are high, the food of the very best, the livery just such as would show off a good-looking man to the best advantage, and Madame Léon, the housekeeper, who has entire charge of everything, is not too lynx-eyed."

"And the work?"

"A mere nothing. Think, there are eighteen of us to serve only two persons, the count and Mademoiselle Marguerite. But then there is never any pleasure, never any amusement here."

"What! is one bored then?"

"Bored to death. This grand house is worse than a tomb. No receptions, no dinners—nothing. Would you believe it, I have never seen the reception-rooms! They are always closed; and the furniture is dropping

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to pieces under its coverings. There are not three visitors in the course of a month."

She was evidently incensed, and the new footman seemed to share her indignation. "Why, how is it?" he exclaimed. "Is the count an owl? A man who's not yet fifty years old, and who's said to be worth several millions."

"Yes, millions; you may safely say it—and perhaps ten, perhaps twenty millions too."

"Then all the more reason why there should be something going on here. What does he do with himself alone, all the blessed day?"

"Nothing. He reads in the library, or wanders about the garden. Sometimes, in the evening, he drives with Mademoiselle Marguerite to the Bois de Boulogne in a closed carriage; but that seldom happens. Besides, there is no such thing as teasing the poor man. I've been in the house for six months, and I've never heard him say anything but: 'yes'; 'no'; 'do this'; 'very well'; 'retire.' You would think these are the only words he knows. Ask M. Casimir if I'm not right."

"Our guv'nor isn't very gay, that's a fact," responded the valet.

The footman was listening with a serious air, as if greatly interested in the character of the people whom he was to serve. "And mademoiselle," he asked, "what does she say to such an existence?"

"Bless me! during the six months she has been here, she has never once complained."

"If she is bored," added M. Casimir, "she conceals it bravely."

"Naturally enough," sneered the waiting-maid, with an ironical gesture; "each month that mademoiselle remains here, brings her too much money for her to complain."

By the laugh that greeted this reply, and by the looks the older servants exchanged, the new-comer must have realized that he had discovered the secret skeleton hidden in every house. "What! what!" he exclaimed, on fire with curiosity; "is there really anything in that? To tell the truth, I was inclined to doubt it."

His companions were evidently about to tell him all they knew, or rather all they thought they knew, when the front door bell rang vigorously.

"There he comes!" exclaimed the concierge; "but he's in too much of a hurry; he'll have to wait a while."

He sullenly pulled the cord, however; the heavy door swayed on its hinges, and a cab-driver, breathless and hatless, burst into the room, crying, "Help! help!"

The servants sprang to their feet.

"Make haste!" continued the driver. "I was bringing a gentleman here—you must know him. He's outside, in my vehicle—"

Without pausing to listen any longer, the servants rushed out, and the driver's incoherent explanation at once became intelligible. At the bottom of the cab, a roomy four-wheeler, a man was lying all of a heap, speechless and motionless. He must have fallen forwards, face downwards, and owing to the jolting of the vehicle his head had slipped under the front seat.

"Poor devil!" muttered M. Casimir, "he must have had a stroke of apoplexy." The valet was peering into the vehicle as he spoke, and his comrades were approaching, when suddenly he drew back, uttering a cry of horror. "Ah, my God! it is the count!"

Whenever there is an accident in Paris, a throng of inquisitive spectators seems to spring up from the very pavement, and indeed more than fifty persons had already congregated round about the vehicle. This circumstance restored M. Casimir's composure; or, at least, some portion of it. "You must drive into the courtyard," he said, addressing the cabman. "M. Bourigeau, open the gate, if you please." And then, turning to another servant, he added:

"And you must make haste and fetch a physician—no matter who. Run to the nearest doctor, and don't return until you bring one with you."

The concierge had opened the gate, but the driver had disappeared; they called him, and on receiving no reply the valet seized the reins and skilfully guided the cab through the gateway.

Having escaped the scrutiny of the crowd, it now remained to remove the count from the vehicle, and this was a difficult task, on account of the singular position of his body; still, they succeeded at last, by opening both doors of the cab, the three strongest men uniting in their efforts. Then they placed him in a large arm-chair, carried him to his own room, and speedily had him undressed and in bed.

He had so far given no sign of life; and as he lay there with his head weighing heavily on the pillow, you might have thought that all was over. His most intimate friend would scarcely have recognised him. His features were swollen and discoloured; his eyes were closed, and a dark purple circle, looking almost like a terrible bruise, extended round them. A spasm had twisted his lips, and his distorted mouth, which was drawn on one side and hung half open, imparted a most sinister expression to his face. In spite of every precaution, he had been wounded as he was removed from the cab. His forehead had been grazed by a piece of iron, and a tiny stream of blood was trickling down upon his face. However, he still breathed; and by listening attentively, one could distinguish a faint rattling in his throat.

The servants, who had been so garrulous a few moments before, were silent now. They lingered in the room, exchanging glances of mute consternation. Their faces were pale and sad, and there were tears in the eyes of some of them. What was passing in their minds? Perhaps they were overcome by that unconquerable fear which sudden and unexpected death always provokes. Perhaps they unconsciously loved this master, whose bread they ate. Perhaps their grief was only selfishness, and they were merely wondering what would become of them, where they should find another situation, and if it would prove a good one. Not knowing what to do, they talked together in subdued voices, each suggesting some remedy he had heard spoken of for such cases. The more sensible among them were proposing to go and inform mademoiselle or Madame Léon, whose rooms where on the floor above, when the rustling of a skirt against the door suddenly made them turn. The person whom they called "mademoiselle" was standing on the threshold.

Mademoiselle Marguerite was a beautiful young girl, about twenty years of age. She was a brunette of medium height, with big gloomy eyes shaded by thick eyebrows. Heavy masses of jet-black hair wreathed her lofty but rather sad and thoughtful forehead. There was something peculiar in her face—an expression of concentrated suffering, and a sort of proud resignation, mingled with timidity.

"What has happened?" she asked, gently. "What is the cause of all the noise I have heard? I have rung three times and the bell was not answered."

No one ventured to reply, and in her surprise she cast a hasty glance around. From where she stood, she could not see the bed stationed in an alcove; but she instantly noted the dejected attitude of the servants, the clothing scattered about the floor, and the disorder that pervaded this magnificent but severely furnished chamber, which was only lighted by the lamp which M. Bourigeau, the concierge carried. A sudden dread seized her; she shuddered, and in a faltering voice she added: "Why are you all here? Speak, tell me what has happened."

M. Casimir stepped forward. "A great misfortune, mademoiselle, a terrible misfortune. The count—"

And he paused, frightened by what he was about to say.

But Mademoiselle Marguerite had understood him. She clasped both hands to her heart, as if she had received a fatal wound, and uttered the single word: "Lost!"

The next moment she turned as pale as death, her head drooped, her eyes closed, and she staggered as if about to fall. Two maids sprang forward to support her, but she gently repulsed them, murmuring, "Thanks! thanks! I am strong now."

She was, in fact, sufficiently strong to conquer her weakness. She summoned all her resolution, and, paler than a statue, with set teeth and dry, glittering eyes, she approached the alcove. She stood there for a moment perfectly motionless, murmuring a few unintelligible words; but at last, crushed by her sorrow, she sank upon her knees beside the bed, buried her face in the counterpane and wept.

Deeply moved by the sight of this despair, the servants held their breath, wondering how it would all end. It ended suddenly. The girl sprang from her knees, as if a gleam of hope had darted through her heart. "A physician!" she said, eagerly.

"I have sent for one, mademoiselle," replied M. Casimir. And hearing a voice and a sound of footsteps on the staircase, he added: "And fortunately, here he comes."

The doctor entered. He was a young man, although his head was almost quite bald. He was short, very thin, clean-shaven, and clad in black from head to foot. Without a word, without a bow, he walked straight to the bedside, lifted the unconscious man's eyelids, felt his pulse, and uncovered his chest, applying his ear to it. "This is a serious case," he said at the close of his examination.

Mademoiselle Marguerite, who had followed his movements with the most poignant anxiety, could not repress a sob. "But all hope is not lost, is it, monsieur?" she asked in a beseeching voice, with hands clasped in passionate entreaty. "You will save him, will you not—you will save him?"

"One may always hope for the best."

This was the doctor's only answer. He had drawn his case of instruments from his pocket, and was testing the points of his lancets on the tip of his finger. When he had found one to his liking: "I must ask you, mademoiselle," said he, "to order these women to retire, and to retire yourself. The men will remain to assist me, if I require help."

She obeyed submissively, but instead of returning to her own room, she remained in the hall, seating herself upon the lower step of the staircase near the door, counting the seconds, and drawing a thousand conjectures from the slightest sound.

Meanwhile, inside the room, the physician, was proceeding slowly, not

from temperament however, but from principle. Dr. Jodon—for such was his name—was an ambitious man who played a part. Educated by a "prince of science," more celebrated for the money he gained than for the cures he effected, he copied his master's method, his gestures, and even the inflections of his voice. By casting in people's eyes the same powder as his teacher had employed, he hoped to obtain the same results: a large practice and an immense fortune. In his secret heart he was by no means disconcerted by his patient's condition; on the contrary, he did not consider the count's state nearly as precarious as it really was.

But bleeding and cupping alike failed to bring the sick man to consciousness He remained speechless and motionless; the only result obtained, was that his breathing became a trifle easier. Finding his endeavours fruitless, the doctor at last declared that all immediate remedies were exhausted, that "the women" might be allowed to return, and that nothing now remained but to wait for the effect of the remedies he was about to prescribe, and which they must procure from the nearest chemist.

Any other man would have been touched by the agony of entreaty contained in the glance that Mademoiselle Marguerite cast upon the physician as she returned into the room; but it did not affect him in the least. He calmly said, "I cannot give my decision as yet."

"My God!" murmured the unhappy girl; "oh, my God, have mercy upon me!"

But the doctor, copying his model, had stationed himself near the fireplace, with his elbow leaning on the mantel-shelf, in a graceful, though rather pompous attitude. "Now," he said, addressing his remarks to M. Casimir, "I desire to make a few inquiries. Is this the first time the Count de Chalusse has had such an attack?"

"Yes, sir—at least since I have been in attendance upon him."

"Very good. That is a chance in our favour. Tell me—have you ever heard him complain of vertigo, or of a buzzing in his ears?"

"Never."

Mademoiselle Marguerite seemed inclined to volunteer some remark, but the doctor imposed silence upon her by a gesture, and continued his examination. "Is the count a great eater?" he inquired. "Does he drink heavily?"

"The count is moderation itself, monsieur, and he always takes a great deal of water with his wine."

The doctor listened with an air of intent thoughtfulness, his head slightly inclined forward, his brow contracted, and his under lip puffed out, while from time to time he stroked his beardless chin. He was copying his master. "The devil!" he said, *sotto voce*. "There must be some cause for such an attack, however. Nothing in the count's constitution predisposes him to such an accident—" Then, suddenly turning towards Mademoiselle Marguerite: "Do you know, mademoiselle, whether the count has experienced any very violent emotion during the past few days?"

"Something occurred this very morning, which seemed to annoy him very much."

"Ah! now we have it," said the doctor, with the air of an oracle. "Why did you not tell me all this at first? It will be necessary for you to give me the particulars, mademoiselle."

The young girl hesitated. The servants were dazed by the doctor's manner; but Mademoiselle Marguerite was far from sharing their awe and admiration. She would have given anything to have had the regular phy-

sician of the household there instead of him! As for this coarse examination in the presence of all these servants, and by the bedside of a man who, in spite of his apparent unconsciousness, was, perhaps, able to hear and to comprehend, she looked upon it as a breach of delicacy, even of propriety.

"It is of the most urgent importance that I should be fully informed of these particulars," repeated the physician peremptorily.

After such an assertion, further hesitation was out of the question. Mademoiselle Marguerite seemed to collect her thoughts, and then she sadly said: "Just as we sat down to breakfast this morning, a letter was handed to the count. No sooner had his eyes fallen upon it, than he turned as white as his napkin. He rose from his seat and began to walk hastily up and down the dining-room, uttering exclamations of anger and sorrow. I spoke to him, but he did not seem to hear me. However, after a few moments, he resumed his seat at the table, and began to eat—"

"As usual?"

"He ate more than usual, monsieur. Only I must tell you that it seemed to me he was scarcely conscious of what he was doing. Four or five times he left the table, and then came back again. At last, after quite a struggle, he seemed to come to some decision. He tore the letter to pieces, and threw the pieces out of the window that opens upon the garden."

Mademoiselle Marguerite expressed herself with the utmost simplicity, and there was certainly nothing particularly extraordinary in her story. Still, those around her listened with breathless curiosity, as though they were expecting some startling revelation, so much does the human mind abhor that which is natural and incline to that which is mysterious.

Without seeming to notice the effect she had produced, and addressing herself to the physician alone, the girl continued: "After the letter was destroyed, M. de Chalusse seemed himself again. Coffee was served, and he afterwards lighted a cigar as usual. However, he soon let it go out. I dared not disturb him by any remarks; but suddenly he said to me: 'It's strange, but I feel very uncomfortable.' A moment passed, without either of us speaking, and then he added: 'I am certainly not well. Will you do me the favour to go to my room for me? Here is the key of my escritoire; open it, and on the upper shelf you will find a small bottle which please bring to me.' I noticed with some surprise that M. de Chalusse, who usually speaks very distinctly, stammered and hesitated considerably in making this request, but, unfortunately, I did not think much about it at the time. I did as he requested, and he poured eight or ten drops of the contents of the vial into a glass of water, and swallowed it."

So intense was Dr. Jodon's interest that he became himself again. He forgot to attitudinize. "And after that?" he asked, eagerly.

"After that, M. de Chalusse seemed to feel much better, and retired to his study as usual. I fancied that any annoyance the letter had caused him was forgotten; but I was wrong, for in the afternoon he sent a message, through Madame Léon, requesting me to join him in the garden. I hastened there, very much surprised, for the weather was extremely disagreeable. 'Dear Marguerite,' he said, on seeing me, 'help me to find the fragments of that letter which I flung from the window this morning. I would give half my fortune for an address which it must certainly have contained, but which I quite overlooked in my anger.' I helped him as he asked. He might have reasonably hoped to succeed, for it was raining when the scraps of paper were thrown out, and instead

of flying through the air, they fell directly on to the ground. We succeeded in finding a large number of the scraps, but what M. de Chalusse so particularly wanted was not to be read on any one of them. Several times he spoke of his regret, and cursed his precipitation."

M. Bourigeau, the concierge, and M. Casimir exchanged a significant smile. They had seen the count searching for the remnants of this letter, and had thought him little better than an idiot. But now everything was explained.

"I was much grieved at the count's disappointment," continued Mademoiselle Marguerite, "but suddenly he exclaimed, joyfully: 'That address—why, such a person will give it to me—what a fool I am!'"

The physician evinced such absorbing interest in this narrative that he forgot to retain his usual impassive attitude. "Such a person! Who—who was this person?" he inquired eagerly, without apparently realizing the impropriety of his question.

But the girl felt indignant. She silenced her indiscreet questioner with a haughty glance, and in the dryest possible tone, replied: "I have forgotten the name."

Cut to the quick, the doctor suddenly resumed his master's pose; but all the same his imperturbable *sang-froid* was sensibly impaired. "Believe me, mademoiselle, that interest alone—a most respectful interest—"

She did not even seem to hear his excuse, but resumed: "I know, however, monsieur, that M. de Chalusse intended applying to the police if he failed to obtain this address from the person in question. After this he appeared to be entirely at ease. At three o'clock he rang for his valet, and ordered dinner two hours earlier than usual. We sat down to table at about half-past four. At five he rose, kissed me gaily, and left the house on foot, telling me that he was confident of success, and that he did not expect to return before midnight." The poor child's firmness now gave way; her eyes filled with tears, and it was in a voice choked with sobs that she added, pointing to M. de Chalusse: "But at half-past six they brought him back as you see him now—"

An interval of silence ensued, so deep that one could hear the faint breathing of the unconscious man still lying motionless on his bed. However, the particulars of the attack were yet to be learned; and it was M. Casimir whom the physician next addressed. "What did the driver who brought your master home say to you?"

"Oh! almost nothing, sir; not ten words."

"You must find this man and bring him to me."

Two servants rushed out in search of him. He could not be far away, for his vehicle was still standing in the courtyard. They found him in a wine-shop near by. Some of the inquisitive spectators who had been disappointed in their curiosity by Casimir's thoughtfulness had treated him to some liquor, and in exchange he had told them all he knew about the affair. He had quite recovered from his fright, and was cheerful, even gay.

"Come make haste, you are wanted," said the servants.

He emptied his glass and followed them with very bad grace, muttering and swearing between his set teeth. The doctor, strange to say, was considerate enough to go out into the hall to question him; but no information of value was gained by the man's answers. He declared that the gentleman had hired him at twelve o'clock, hoping by this means to extort pay for five hours driving, which, joined to the liberal gratuity he could not fail to obtain, would remunerate him handsomely for his day's work.

Living is dear, it should be remembered, and a fellow makes as much as he can.

When the cabby had gone off still growling, although a couple of louis had been placed in his hand, the doctor returned to his patient. He involuntarily assumed his accustomed attitude, with crossed arms, a gloomy expression of countenance, and his forehead furrowed as if with thought and anxiety. But this time he was not acting a part. In spite, or rather by reason of, the full explanation that had been given him, he found something suspicious and mysterious in the whole affair. A thousand vague and undefinable suspicions crossed his mind. Was he in presence of a crime? Certainly, evidently not. But what was the cause then of the mystery and reticence he detected? Was he upon the track of some lamentable family secret—one of those terrible scandals, concealed for a long time, but which at last burst forth with startling effect? The prospect of being mixed up in such an affair caused him infinite pleasure. It would bring him into notice; he would be mentioned in the papers; and his increased practice would fill his hands with gold.

But what could he do to ingratiate himself with these people, impose himself upon them if needs be? He reflected for some time, and finally what he thought an excellent plan occurred to him. He approached Mademoiselle Marguerite, who was weeping in an arm-chair, and touched her gently on the shoulder. She sprang to her feet at once. "One more question, mademoiselle," said he, imparting as much solemnity to his tone as he could. "Do you know what liquid it was that M. de Chalusse took this morning?"

"Alas! no, monsieur."

"It is very important that I should know. The accuracy of my diagnosis is dependent upon it. What has become of the vial?"

"I think M. de Chalusse replaced it in his escritoire."

The physician pointed to an article of furniture to the left of the fireplace: "There?" he asked.

"Yes, monsieur."

He deliberated, but at last conquering his hesitation, he said: "Could we not obtain this vial?"

Mademoiselle Marguerite blushed. "I haven't the key," she faltered, in evident embarrassment.

M. Casimir approached: "It must be in the count's pocket, and if mademoiselle will allow me—"

But she stepped back with outstretched arms as if to protect the escritoire. "No," she exclaimed, "no—the escritoire shall not be touched. I will not permit it—"

"But, mademoiselle," insisted the doctor, "your father—"

"The Count de Chalusse is not my father!"

Dr. Jodon was greatly disconcerted by Mademoiselle Marguerite's vehemence. "Ah!" said he, in three different tones, "ah! ah!"

In less than a second, a thousand strange and contradictory suppositions darted through his brain. Who, then, could this girl be, if she were not Mademoiselle de Chalusse? What right had she in that house? How was it that she reigned as a sovereign there? Above all, why this angry outburst for no other apparent cause than a very natural and exceedingly insignificant request on his part?

However, she had regained her self-possession, and it was easy to see by her manner that she was seeking some means of escape from threatened

danger. At last she found it. "Casimir," she said, authoritatively "search M. de Chalusse's pocket for the key of his escritoire."

Astonished by what he regarded as a new caprice, the valet obeyed. He gathered up the garments strewn over the floor, and eventually drew a key from one of the waistcoat pockets. Mademoiselle Marguerite took it from him, and then in a determined tone, exclaimed: "A hammer."

It was brought; whereupon, to the profound amazement of the physician, she knelt down beside the fire-place, laid the key upon one of the andirons, and with a heavy blow of the hammer, broke it into fragments. "Now," said she, quietly, "my mind will be at rest. I am certain," she added, turning towards the servants, "that M. de Chalusse would approve what I have done. When he recovers, he will have another key made."

The explanation was superfluous. All the servants understood the motive that had influenced her, and were saying to themselves, "Mademoiselle is right. It would not do to touch the escritoire of a dying man. Who knows but what there are millions in it? If anything were missed, why any of us might be accused. But if the key is destroyed, it will be impossible to suspect any one."

However, the physician's conjectures were of an entirely different nature. "What can there be in that escritoire which she desires to conceal?" he thought.

But there was no excuse for prolonging his visit. Once more he examined the sick man, whose condition remained unchanged; and then, after explaining what was to be done in his absence, he declared that he must leave at once, as he had a number of important visits to make; he added, however, that he would return about midnight.

"Madame Léon and I will watch over M. de Chalusse," replied Mademoiselle Marguerite; "that is sufficient assurance, monsieur, that your orders will be obeyed to the letter. Only—you will not take offence, I trust, if I ask the count's regular physician to meet you in consultation."

Such a proposal was anything but pleasing to M. Jodon, who had met with the same misfortune in this aristocratic neighbourhood several times before. When an accident happened, he was summoned because he chanced to be close at hand, but just as he was flattering himself that he had gained a desirable patient, he found himself in presence of some celebrated physician, who had come from a distance in his carriage. Accustomed to such disappointments, he knew how to conceal his dissatisfaction.

"Were I in your place, mademoiselle, I should do precisely what you suggest," he answered, "and should you think it unnecessary for me to call, I—"

"Oh! monsieur, on the contrary, I shall certainly expect you."

"In that case, very well." Thereupon he bowed and left the room.

But Mademoiselle Marguerite followed him on to the landing. "You know, monsieur," she said, speaking rapidly in an undertone, "that I am not M. de Chalusse's daughter. You may, therefore, tell me the truth. Is his condition hopeless?"

"Alarming—yes; hopeless—no."

"But, monsieur, this terrible unconsciousness—"

"It usually follows such an attack as he has been the victim of. Still we may hope that the paralysis will gradually disappear, and the power of motion return after a time."

Mademoiselle Marguerite was listening, pale, agitated, and embarrassed. It was evident that she had a question on her lips which she scarcely dared

to ask. At last, however, summoning all her courage, she exclaimed: "And if M. de Chalusse should not recover, will he die without regaining consciousness—without being able to speak?"

"I am unable to say, mademoiselle—the count's malady is one of those which set at naught all the hypotheses of science."

She thanked him sadly, sent a servant to summon Madame Léon, and returned to the count's room.

As for the doctor, he said to himself as he went down stairs, "What a strange girl! Is she afraid that the count will regain consciousness? or, on the contrary, does she wish him to speak? Is there any question of a will under all this? What else can it be? What is at stake?" His preoccupation was so intense that he almost forgot where he was going, and he paused on every step. It was not until the fresh air of the courtyard blew upon his face, reminding him of the realities of life, that the charlatanesque element in his nature regained the ascendency. "My friend," he said, addressing M. Casimir, who was lighting him out, "you must at once have some straw spread over the street so as to deaden the sound of the vehicles. And to-morrow, you must inform the commissary of police."

Ten minutes later a thick bed of straw had been strewed across the thoroughfare, and the drivers of passing vehicles involuntarily slackened their speed, for every one in Paris knows what this signifies. M. Casimir personally superintended the work which was intrusted to the grooms, and he was about to return indoors again, when a young man, who had been walking up and down in front of the mansion for more than an hour, hastily approached him. He was a beardless fellow with a strangely wrinkled face, as leaden-tinted as that of a confirmed absinthe-drinker. His general expression was shrewd, and at the same time impudent, and surprising audacity gleamed in his eyes. "What do you want?" asked M. Casimir.

The young fellow bowed humbly, and replied, "Ah, don't you recognise me, monsieur? I'm Toto—excuse me—Victor Chupin, employed by M. Isidore Fortunat."

"Oh, yes. I recollect."

"I came, in obedience to my employer's orders, to inquire if you had obtained the information you promised him; but seeing that something had happened at your house, I didn't dare go in, but decided to watch for you—"

"And you did quite right, my lad. I have no information to give you—ah, yes! stop! The Marquis de Valorsay was closeted with the count for two hours yesterday. But what good will that do? The count has been taken suddenly ill, and he will scarcely live through the night."

Victor Chupin was thunderstruck. "Impossible!" he cried. "Is it for him that the straw has been strewed in the street?"

"It's for him."

"What a lucky fellow! No one would go to such expense for me! But I have an idea that my guv'nor will hardly laugh when I tell him this. Still, thank you all the same, m'sieur, and *au revoir*." He was darting off when a sudden thought detained him. "Excuse me," said he, with conjuror like volubility; "I was so horrified that I forgot business. Tell me, m'sieur, if the count dies, you'll take charge of the funeral arrangements, won't you? Very well; a word of advice then. Don't go to the regular undertakers, but come to me: here's my address"—proffering a card—"I will treat with the undertakers for you, and take charge of everything. It

will be much better and far cheaper for you, on account of certain arrangements I've made with these parties. Everything, to the very last plume, is warranted to give perfect satisfaction. Each item will be specified in the bill, and can be verified during the ceremony, no payment exacted until after delivery. Well, is it understood?"

The valet shrugged his shoulders. "Nonsense!" said he, carelessly; "what is all that to me?"

"Ah! I forgot to mention that there would be a commission of two hundred francs to divide between us."

"That's a consideration. Give me your card, and rely on me. My compliments to M. Fortunat, please." And so saying, he re-entered the house.

Victor Chupin drew a huge silver watch from his pocket and consulted it. "Five minutes to eight," he growled, "and the guv'nor expects me at eight precisely. I shall have to stretch out my legs."

II.

M. Isidore Fortunat resided at No. 27 Place de la Bourse, on the third floor. He had a handsome suite of apartments: a drawing-room, a dining-room, a bedroom, a large outer office where his clerks worked, and a private one, which was the sanctuary of his thoughts and meditations. The whole cost him only six thousand francs a year, a mere trifle as rents go now-a-days. His lease entitled him, moreover, to the use of a room ten feet square, up under the eaves, where he lodged his servant, Madame Dodelin, a woman of forty-six or thereabouts, who had met with reverses of fortune, and who now took such good charge of his establishment, that his table—for he ate at home—was truly fit for a sybarite.

Having been established here for five years or more, M. Fortunat was very well known in the neighbourhood, and, as he paid his rent promptly, and met all his obligations without demur, he was generally respected. Besides, people knew very well from what source M. Fortunat derived his income. He gave his attention to contested claims, liquidations, the recovery of legacies, and so on, as was shown by the inscription in large letters which figured on the elegant brass plate adorning his door. He must have had a prosperous business, for he employed six collectors in addition to the clerks who wrote all day long in his office; and his clients were so numerous that the concierge was often heard to complain of the way they ran up and down the stairs, declaring that it was worse than a procession.

To be just, we must add that M. Fortunat's appearance, manners and conduct were of a nature to quiet all suspicions. He was some thirty-eight years of age, extremely methodical in his habits, gentle and refined in his manner, intelligent, very good-looking, and always dressed in perfect taste. He was accused of being, in business matters, as cold, as polished, and as hard as one of the marble slabs of the Morgue; but then, no one was obliged to employ him unless they chose to do so. This much is certain: he did not frequent *cafés* or places of amusement. If he went out at all after dinner, it was only to pass the evening at the house of some rich client in the neighbourhood. He detested the smell of tobacco, and was inclined to be devout—never failing to attend eight o'clock mass on Sunday mornings. His housekeeper suspected him of matrimonial designs, and perhaps she was right.

On the evening that the Count de Chaluzse was struck with apoplexy M.

Isidore Fortunat had been dining alone, and was sipping a cup of tea when the door bell rang, announcing the arrival of a visitor. Madame Dodelin hastened to open the door, and in walked Victor Chupin, breathless from his hurried walk. It had not taken him twenty-five minutes to cover the distance which separates the Rue de Courcelles from the Place de la Bourse.

"You are late, Victor," said M. Fortunat, quietly.

"That's true, monsieur, but it isn't my fault. Everything was in confusion down there, and I was obliged to wait—"

"How is that? Why?"

"The Count de Chalusse was stricken with apoplexy this evening, and he is probably dead by this time."

M. Fortunat sprang from his chair with a livid face and trembling lips. "Stricken with apoplexy!" he exclaimed in a husky voice. "I am ruined!"

Then, fearing Madame Dodelin's curiosity, he seized the lamp and rushed into his office, crying to Chupin: "Follow me."

Chupin obeyed without a word, for he was a shrewd fellow, and knew how to make the best of a trying situation. He was not usually allowed to enter this private room, the floor of which was covered with a magnificent carpet; and so, after carefully closing the door, he remained standing hat in hand, and looking somewhat intimidated. But M. Fortunat seemed to have forgotten his presence. After depositing the lamp on the mantelshelf, he walked several times round and round the room like a hunted beast seeking for some means of egress.

"If the count is dead," he muttered, "the Marquis de Valorsay is lost! Farewell to the millions!"

The blow was so cruel, and so entirely unexpected, that he could not, would not believe in its reality. He walked straight to Chupin, and caught him by the collar, as if the young fellow had been the cause of this misfortune. "It isn't possible," said he; "the count *cannot* be dead. You are deceiving me, or they deceived you. You must have misunderstood—you only wished to give some excuse for your delay perhaps. Speak, say something!"

As a rule, Chupin was not easily impressed, but he felt almost frightened by his employer's agitation. "I only repeated what M. Casimir told me, monsieur," was his reply.

He then wished to furnish some particulars, but M. Fortunat had already resumed his furious tramp to and fro, giving vent to his wrath and despair in incoherent exclamations. "Forty thousand francs lost!" he exclaimed. "Forty thousand francs, counted out there on my desk! I see them yet, counted and placed in the hand of the Marquis de Valorsay in exchange for his signature. My savings for a number of years, and I have only a worthless scrap of paper to show for them. That cursed marquis! And he was to come here this evening, and I was to give him ten thousand francs more. They are lying there in that drawer. Let him come, the wretch, let him come!"

Anger had positively brought foam to M. Fortunat's lips, and any one seeing him then would subsequently have had but little confidence in his customary good-natured air and unctuous politeness. "And yet the marquis is as much to be pitied as I am," he continued. "He loses as much, even more! And such a sure thing it seemed, too! What speculation can a fellow engage in after this? And a man must put his money somewhere; he can't bury it in the ground!"

Chupin listened with an air of profound commiseration; but it was only assumed. He was inwardly jubilant, for his interest in the affair was in direct opposition to that of his employer. Indeed, if M. Fortunat lost forty thousand francs by the Count de Chalusse's death, Chupin expected to make a hundred francs commission on the funeral.

"Still, he may have made a will!" pursued M. Fortunat. "But no, I'm sure he hasn't. A poor devil who has only a few sous to leave behind him always takes this precaution. He thinks he may be run over by an omnibus and suddenly killed, and he always writes and signs his last wishes. But millionaires don't think of such things; they believe themselves immortal!" He paused to reflect for a moment, for power of reflection had returned to him. His excitement had quickly spent itself by reason of its very violence. "This much is certain," he resumed, slowly, and in a more composed voice, "whether the count has made a will or not, Valorsay will lose the millions he expected from Chalusse. If there is no will, Mademoiselle Marguerite won't have a sou, and then, good evening! If there is one, this devil of a girl, suddenly becoming her own mistress, and wealthy into the bargain, will send Monsieur de Valorsay about his business, especially if she loves another, as he himself admits—and in that case, again good evening!"

M. Fortunat drew out his handkerchief, and, pausing in front of the looking-glass, wiped the perspiration from his brow, and arranged his disordered hair. He was one of those men who may be stunned, but never crushed, by a catastrophe. "In conclusion," he muttered, "I must enter my forty thousand francs as an item in the profit and loss account. It only remains to be seen if it would not be possible to regain them in the same affair." He was again master of himself, and never had his mind been more clear. He seated himself at his desk, leant his elbows upon it, rested his head on his hands, and remained for some time perfectly motionless; but there was triumph in his gesture when he at last looked up again.

"I am safe," he muttered, so low that Chupin could not hear him. "What a fool I was! If there is no will a fourth of the millions shall be mine! Ah, when a man knows his ground, he never need lose the battle! But I must act quickly," he added, "very quickly." And so speaking, he rose and glanced at the clock. "Nine o'clock," said he. "I must open the campaign this very evening."

Motionless in his dark corner, Chupin still retained his commiserating attitude; but he was so oppressed with curiosity that he could scarcely breathe. He opened his eyes and ears to the utmost, and watched his employer's slightest movements with intense interest.

Prompt to act when he had once decided upon his course, M. Fortunat now drew from his desk a large portfolio, crammed full of letters, receipts, bills, deeds of property, and old parchments. "I can certainly discover the necessary pretext here," he murmured, rummaging through the mass of papers. But he did not at once find what he sought, and he was growing impatient, as could be seen by his feverish haste, when all at once he paused with a sigh of relief. "At last!"

He held in his hand a soiled and crumpled note of hand, affixed by a pin to a huissier's protest, thus proving conclusively that it had been dishonoured. M. Fortunat waved these strips of paper triumphantly, and with a satisfied air exclaimed: "It is here that I must strike; it is here—if Casimir hasn't deceived me—that I shall find the indispensable information I need."

He was in such haste that he did not wait to put his portfolio in order. He threw it with the papers it had contained into the drawer of his desk again, and, approaching Chupin, he asked, "It was you, was it not, Victor, who obtained that information respecting the solvency of the Vantrassons, husband and wife, who let out furnished rooms?"

"Yes, monsieur, and I gave you the answer: nothing to hope for—"

"I know; but that doesn't matter. Do you remember their address?"

"Perfectly. They are now living on the Asnières Road, beyond the fortifications, on the right hand side."

"What is the number?"

Chupin hesitated, reflected for a moment, and then began to scratch his head furiously, as he was in the habit of doing whenever his memory failed him and he wished to recall it to duty. "I'm not sure whether the number is eighteen or forty-six," he said, at last; "that is—"

"Never mind," interrupted M. Fortunat. "If I sent you to the house could you find it?"

"Oh—yes, m'sieur—at once—with my eyes shut. I can see the place perfectly—a rickety old barrack. There is a tract of unoccupied land on one side, and a kitchen-garden in the rear."

"Very well; you shall accompany me there."

Chupin seemed astonished by this strange proposal. "What m'sieur," said he, "do you think of going there at this time of night?"

"Why not? Shall we find the establishment closed?"

"No; certainly not. Vantrasson doesn't merely keep furnished rooms; he's a grocer, and sells liquor too. His place is open until eleven o'clock at least. But if you are going there to present a bill, it's perhaps a little late. If I were in your place, m'sieur, I should wait till to-morrow. It's raining, and the streets are deserted. It's an out-of-the-way place too; and in such cases, a man has been known to settle his account with whatever came handiest—with a cudgel, or a bullet, for instance."

"Are you afraid?"

This question seemed so utterly absurd to Chupin that he was not in the least offended by it; his only answer was a disdainful shrug of the shoulders.

"Then we will go," remarked M. Fortunat. "While I'm getting ready, go and hire a cab, and see that you get a good horse."

Chupin was off in an instant, tearing down the staircase like a tempest. There was a cab-stand only a few steps from the house, but he preferred to run to the jobmaster's stables in the Rue Feydeau.

"Cab, sir!" shouted several men, as they saw him approaching.

He made no reply, but began to examine the horses with the air of a connoisseur, until at last he found an animal that suited him. Thereupon he beckoned to the driver, and going to the little office where a woman sat reading: "My five sous, if you please," he said, authoritatively.

The woman looked at him. Most jobmasters are in the habit of giving five sous to any servant who comes in search of a cab for his master; and this was the custom here. But the keeper of the office, who felt sure that Chupin was not a servant, hesitated; and this made the young fellow angry. "Make haste," he cried, imperiously. "If you don't, I shall run to the nearest stand."

The woman at once threw him five sous, which he pocketed with a satisfied grin. They were his—rightfully his—since he had taken the trouble to gain them. He then hastily returned to the office to inform his employer that the cab was waiting at the door, and found himself

face to face with a sight which made him open his eyes to their widest extent.

M. Fortunat had profited by his clerk's absence, not to disguise himself —that would be saying too much—but to make some changes in his appearance. He had arrayed himself in a long overcoat, shiny with grease and wear, and falling below his knees ; in place of his elegant satin cravat he had knotted a gaudy silk neckerchief about his throat ; his boots were worn, and out of shape ; and his hat would have been treated with contempt even by a dealer in old clothes. Of the prosperous Fortunat, so favourably known round about the Place de la Bourse, naught remained save his face and his hands. Another Fortunat had taken his place, more than needy in aspect—wretched, famished, gaunt with hunger, ready for any desperate deed. And, yet, he seemed at ease in this garb ; it yielded to his every movement, as if he had worn it for a long time. The butterfly had become a chrysalis again. Chupin's admiring smile must have repaid him for his trouble. Since the young clerk evinced approval, M. Fortunat felt sure that Vantrasson would take him for what he wished to appear—a poor devil of an agent, who was acting on some other person's behalf. "Let us start at once," said he.

But just as he was leaving the ante-room, he remembered an order of great importance which he wished to give. He called Madame Dodelin, and without paying the slightest heed to her astonishment at seeing him thus attired : "If the Marquis de Valorsay comes, in my absence," said he —"and he *will* come—ask him to wait for me. I shall return before midnight. Don't take him into my office—he can wait in the drawing-room."

This last order was certainly unnecessary, since M. Fortunat had closed and double-locked his office-door, and placed the key carefully in his own pocket. But perhaps he had forgotten this circumstance. There were now no traces of his recent anger and disappointment. He was in excellent humour ; and you might have supposed that he was starting on an enterprise from which he expected to derive both pleasure and profit.

Chupin was climbing to a place on the box beside the driver when his employer bade him take a seat inside the vehicle. They were not long in reaching their destination, for the horse was really a good one, and the driver had been stimulated by the promise of a magnificent gratuity. In fact, M. Fortunat and his companion reached the Asnières Road in less than forty minutes.

In obedience to the orders he had received before starting, the cabman drew up on the right hand side of the road, at about a hundred paces from the city gate, beyond the fortifications. "Well, sir, here you are! Are you satisfied?" he inquired, as he opened the door.

"Perfectly satisfied," replied M. Fortunat. "Here is your promised gratuity. Now, you have only to wait for us. Don't stir from this place. Do you understand?"

But the driver shook his head. "Excuse me," he said, "but if it's all the same to you, I will station myself over there near the gate. Here, you see, I should be afraid to go to sleep, while over there—"

"Very well ; suit yourself," M. Fortunat replied.

This precaution on the driver's part convinced him that Chupin had not exaggerated the evil reputation of this quarter of the Parisian suburbs And, indeed, there was little of a reassuring character in the aspect of this broad road, quite deserted at this hour, and shrouded in the darkness of a tempestuous night. The rain had ceased falling, but the wind blew with

increased violence, twisting the branches off the trees, tearing slates from the roofs, and shaking the street-lamps so furiously as to extinguish the gas. They could not see a step before them; the mud was ankle-deep, and not a person, not a solitary soul was visible.

"Are we almost there?" M. Fortunat asked every ten paces.

"Almost there, m'sieur."

Chupin said this; but to tell the truth, he knew nothing about it. He tried to discover where he was, but did not succeed. Houses were becoming scanty, and vacant plots of building ground more numerous; it was only with the greatest difficulty that one could occasionally discern a light. At last, however, after a quarter of an hour's hard struggling, Chupin uttered a joyful cry. "Here we are, m'sieur—look!" said he.

A large building, five storeys high, sinister of aspect, and standing quite alone, could just be distinguished in the darkness. It was already falling to pieces, and yet it was not entirely completed. Plainly enough, the speculator who had undertaken the enterprise had not been rich enough to complete it. On seeing the many closely pierced windows of the façade, a passer-by could not fail to divine for what purpose the building had been erected; and in order that no one should remain in ignorance of it, this inscription: "Furnished Rooms," figured in letters three feet high, between the third and fourth floors. The inside arrangements could be easily divined: innumerable rooms, all small and inconvenient, and let out at exorbitant rentals.

However, Victor Chupin's memory had misled him. This establishment was not on the right, but on the left-hand side of the road, a perfect mire through which M. Fortunat and his companion were obliged to cross. Their eyes having become accustomed to the darkness, they could discern sundry details as they approached the building. The ground floor comprised two shops, one of which was closed, but the other was still open, and a faint light gleamed through the soiled red curtains. Over the frontage appeared the shopkeeper's name, Vantrasson, while on either side, in smaller letters, were the words: "Groceries and Provisions—Foreign and French Wines." Everything about this den dneoted abject poverty and low debauchery.

M. Fortunat certainly did not recoil, but before entering the shop he was not sorry to have an opportunity to reconnoitre. He approached cautiously, and peered through the window at a place where a rent in the curtain allowed him some view of the interior. Behind the counter a woman who looked some fifty years of age was seated, mending a soiled dress by the light of a smoking lamp. She was short and very stout. She seemed literally weighed down, and puffed out by an unwholesome and unnatural mass of superfluous flesh; and she was as white as if her veins had been filled with water, instead of blood. Her hanging cheeks, her receding forehead, and her thin lips, imparted an alarming expression of wickedness and cunning to her countenance. At the farther end of the store Fortunat could vaguely discern the figure of a man seated on a stool. He seemed to be asleep, for his crossed arms rested on a table, with his head leaning on them.

"Good luck!" whispered Chupin in his employer's ear; "there is not a customer in the place. Vantrasson and his wife are alone." This circumstance was by no means displeasing to M. Fortunat, as could be seen by his expression of face. "So, m'sieur," continued Chupin, "you need have no fears. I'll remain here and watch, while you go in."

M. Fortunat did so. On hearing the door open and shut, the woman

laid down her work. "What can I do for monsieur?" she asked, in a wheedling voice.

M. Fortunat did not reply at once; but he drew the note with which he had provided himself from his pocket, and displayed it. "I am a huissier's clerk," he then exclaimed; "and I called in reference to this little matter—a note of hand for five hundred and eighty-three francs, value received in goods, signed Vantrasson, and made payable to the order of a person named Barutin."

"An execution!" said the woman, whose voice suddenly soured. "Vantrasson, wake up, and come and see about this."

This summons was unnecessary. On hearing the words "note of hand," the man had lifted his head; and at the name of Barutin, he rose and approached with a heavy, uncertain step, as if he had not yet slept off his intoxication. He was younger than his wife, tall, with a well-proportioned and athletic form. His features were regular, but the abuse of alcohol and all sorts of excesses had greatly marred them, and their present expression was one of ferocious brutishness. "What's that you are talking about?" he asked in a harsh, grating voice. "Is it to mock people that you come and ask for money on the 15th of October—rent day? Where have you seen any money left after the landlord has made his round? Besides, what is this bill? Give it me to look at."

M. Fortunat was not guilty of such folly; he did not intrust the paper to Vantrasson's hand, but held it a little distance from him, and then read it aloud.

When he had finished: "That note fell due eighteen months ago," declared Vantrasson. "It is worth nothing now—"

"You are mistaken—a note of this kind is of value any time within five years after the day it goes to protest."

"Possibly; but as Barutin has failed, and gone no one knows where, I am released—"

"Another mistake on your part. You owe these five hundred and eighty-three francs to the person who bought this note at Barutin's sale, and who has given my employer orders to prosecute—"

The blood had risen to Vantrasson's face. "And what of that? Do you suppose I've never been sued for debts before? Even the king can't take anything from a person who possesses nothing; and I own nothing. My furniture is all pawned or mortgaged, and my stock is not worth a hundred francs. When your employer finds it useless to waste money in worrying me, he'll let me alone. You can't injure a man like me."

"Do you really think so?"

"I'm sure of it."

"Unfortunately you are again mistaken, for although the holder of the note doesn't care so very much about obtaining his dues, he'll spend his own money like water to make trouble for you." And thereupon M. Fortunat began to draw a vivid and frightful picture of a poor debtor pursued by a rich creditor who harassed him, and tortured him, and hounded him everywhere, until not even a change of clothing was left him.

Vantrasson rolled his eyes and brandished his formidable fist in the most defiant manner; but his wife was evidently much alarmed. At last she could bear it no longer, and rising hastily she led her husband to the rear of the shop, saying: "Come, I must speak with you."

He followed her, and they remained for some little time conversing together in a low tone, but with excited gestures. When they returned,

the woman opened the conversation. "Alas! sir," she said to M. Fortunat, "we have no money just now; business is so very bad, and if you prosecute us, we are lost. What can be done? You look like an honest man; give us your advice."

M. Fortunat did not reply at once; he was apparently absorbed in thought, but suddenly he exclaimed: "One owes a duty to unfortunate folks, and I'm going to tell you the exact truth. My employer, who isn't a bad man at heart, hasn't the slightest desire for revenge. He said to me: 'Go and see these Vantrassons, and if they seem to be worthy people, propose a compromise. If they choose to accept it, I shall be quite satisfied."

"And what is this compromise?"

"It is this: you must write an acknowledgment of the debt on a sheet of stamped paper, together with a promise to pay a little on account each month. In exchange I will give you this note of hand."

The husband and wife exchanged glances, and it was the woman who said: "We accept."

But to carry out this arrangement it was necessary to have a sheet of stamped paper, and the spurious clerk had neglected to provide himself with some. This circumstance seemed to annoy him greatly, and you might almost have sworn that he regretted the concession he had promised. Did he think of going? Madame Vantrasson feared so, and turning eagerly to her husband, she exclaimed: "Run to the tobacco shop in the Rue de Levis; you will find some paper there!"

He started off at once, and M. Fortunat breathed freely again. He had certainly retained his composure admirably during the interview, but more than once he had fancied that Vantrasson was about to spring on him, crush him with his brawny hands, tear the note from him, burn it, and then throw him, Fortunat, out into the street, helpless and nearly dead. But now that danger had passed, and Madame Vantrasson, fearing he might tire of waiting, was prodigal in her attentions. She brought him the only unbroken chair in the establishment, and insisted that he should partake of some refreshment—a glass of wine at the very least. While rummaging among the bottles, she alternately thanked him and complained, declaring she had a right to repine, since she had known better days—but fate had been against her ever since her marriage, though she had little thought she would end her days in such misery, after having been so happy in the Count de Chalusse's household many years before.

To all appearance, M. Fortunat listened with the mere superficial interest which ordinary politeness requires one to show, but in reality his heart was filled with intense delight. Coming here without any clearly-defined plan, circumstances had served him a thousand times better than he could reasonably have hoped. He had preserved his power over the Vantrassons, had won their confidence, had succeeded in obtaining a *tête-à-tête* with the wife, and to crown all, this woman alluded, of her own accord, to the very subject upon which he was longing to question her.

"Ah! if I were only back in the Count's household again," she exclaimed. "Six hundred francs a year, and gifts worth double that amount. Those were good times for me. But you know how it is—one is never content with one's lot, and then the heart is weak—"

She had not succeeded in finding the sweet wine which she proposed to her guest; so in its place she substituted a mixture of ratafia and brandy in two large glasses which she placed upon the counter. "One evening, to my sorrow," she resumed, "I met Vantrasson at a ball. It was the 13th

day of the month. I might have known no good would come of it. Ah, you should have seen him at that time, in full uniform. He belonged to the Paris Guards then. All the women were crazy about soldiers, and my head was turned, too—" Her tone, her gestures, and the compression of her thin lips, revealed the bitterness of her disappointment and her unavailing regret. "Ah, these handsome men!" she continued; "don't talk to me about them! This one had heard of my savings. I had nineteen thousand francs, so he begged me to marry him, and I was fool enough to consent. Yes, fool—for I was forty, and he was only thirty. I might have known it was my money that he wanted, and not me. However, I gave up my situation, and even purchased a substitute for him, in order that I might have him all to myself."

She had gradually warmed with her theme, as she described her confidence and blind credulity, and then, with a tragic gesture, as if she desired to drive away these cruel memories, she suddenly seized her glass and emptied it at a draught.

Chupin, who was still at his post outside, experienced a thrill of envy, and involuntarily licked his lips. "A mixed ratafia," he said, longingly. "I shouldn't object to one myself."

However, this choice compound seemed to inspire Madame Vantrasson with renewed energy, for, with still greater earnestness, she resumed: "At first, all went well. We employed my savings in purchasing the Hôtel des Espagnes, in the Rue Notre Dame des Victoires, and business prospered; there was never a vacant room. But any person who has drank, sir, will drink again. Vantrasson kept sober for a few months, but gradually he fell into his old habits. He was in such a condition most of the time that he was scarcely able to ask for food. And if that had been all! But, unfortunately, he was too handsome a man to be a good husband. One night he didn't come home, and the next day, when I ventured to reproach him—very gently, I assure you—he answered me with an oath and a blow. All our happiness was over! Monsieur declared that he was master, and would do as he liked. He drank and carried away all the wine from the cellar—he took all the money—he remained away for weeks together; and if I complained—more blows!"

Her voice trembled, and a tear gathered in her eye; but, wiping it away with the back of her hand, she resumed: "Vantrasson was always drunk, and I spent my time in crying my very eyes out. Business became very bad, and soon everybody left the house. We were obliged to sell it. We did so, and bought a small *café*. But by the end of the year we lost that. Fortunately, I still had a little money left, and so I bought a stock of groceries in my own name; but in less than six months the stock was eaten up, and we were cast into the street. What was to be done? Vantrasson drank worse than ever; he demanded money when he knew that I had none to give him, and he treated me even more cruelly than before. I lost courage—and yet one must live! Oh, you wouldn't believe it if I told you how we have lived for the past four years." She did not tell him, but contented herself with adding, "When you begin to go down hill, there is no such thing as stopping; you roll lower and lower, until you reach the bottom, as we have done. Here we live, no one knows how; we have to pay our rent each week, and if we are driven from this place, I see no refuge but the river."

"If I had been in your position, I should have left my husband," M. Fortunat ventured to remark.

"Yes—it would have been better, no doubt. People advised me to do so, and I tried. Three or four times I went away, and yet I always returned—it was stronger than myself. Besides, I'm his wife; I've paid dearly for him; he's mine—I won't yield him to anyone else. He beats me, no doubt; I despise him, I hate him, and yet I—" She poured out part of a glass of brandy, and swallowed it; then, with a gesture of rage, she added: "I can't give him up! It's fate! As it is now, it will be until the end, until he starves, or I—"

M. Fortunat's countenance wore an expression of profound commiseration A looker-on would have supposed him interested and sympathetic to the las degree; but in reality, he was furious. Time was passing, and the conver sation was wandering farther and farther from the object of his visit. "I am surprised, madame," said he, "that you never applied to your former employer, the Count de Chalusse."

"Alas! I did apply to him for assistance several times—"

"With what result?"

"The first time I went to him he received me; I told him my troubles, and he gave me bank-notes to the amount of five thousand francs."

M. Fortunat raised his hands to the ceiling. "Five thousand francs!" he repeated, in a tone of astonishment; "this count must be very rich—"

"So rich, monsieur, that he doesn't know how much he's worth. He owns, nobody knows how many houses in Paris, châteaux in every part of the country, entire villages, forests—his gold comes in by the shovel-full."

The spurious clerk closed his eyes, as if he were dazzled by this vision of wealth.

"The second time I went to the count's house," resumed Madame Vantrasson, "I didn't see him, but he sent me a thousand francs. The third and last time they gave me twenty francs at the door, and told me that the count had gone on a journey. I understood that I could hope for no further help from him. Besides, all the servants had been changed. One morning, without any apparent reason, M. de Chalusse dismissed all the old servants, so they told me. He even sent away the concierge and the housekeeper."

"Why didn't you apply to his wife?"

"M. de Chalusse isn't married. He never has been married."

From the expression of solicitude upon her guest's features, Madame Vantrasson supposed he was racking his brain to discover some mode of escape from her present difficulties. "If I were in your place," he said, "I should try to interest his relatives and family in my case—"

"The count has no relatives."

"Impossible!"

"He hasn't, indeed. During the ten years I was in his service, I heard him say more than a dozen times that he alone was left of all his family—that all the others were dead. People pretend that this is the reason why he is so immensely rich."

M. Fortunat's interest was no longer assumed; he was rapidly approaching the real object of his visit. "No relatives!" he muttered. "Who, then, will inherit his millions when he dies?"

Madame Vantrasson jerked her head. "Who can say?" she replied. "Everything will go to the government, probably, unless— But no, that's impossible."

"What's impossible?"

"Nothing. I was thinking of the count's sister, Mademoiselle Hermine."

"His sister! Why, you said just now that he had no relatives."

"It's the same as if he hadn't; no one knows what has become of her, poor creature! Some say that she married; others declare that she died. It's quite a romance."

M. Isidore Fortunat was literally upon the rack; and to make his sufferings still more horrible, he dared not ask any direct question, nor allow his curiosity to become manifest, for fear of alarming the woman. "Let me see," said he; "I think—I am sure that I have heard—or that I have read—I cannot say which—some story about a Mademoiselle de Chalusse. It was something terrible, wasn't it?"

"Terrible, indeed. But what I was speaking of happened a long time ago—twenty-five or twenty-six years ago, at the very least. I was still in my own part of the country—at Besançon. No one knows the exact truth about the affair."

"What! not even you?"

"Oh! I—that's an entirely different thing. When I entered the count's ervice, six years later, there was still an old gardener who knew the whole story, and who told it to me, making me swear that I would never betray his confidence."

Lavish of details as she had been in telling her own story, it was evident that she was determined to exercise a prudent reserve in everything connected with the De Chalusse family; and M. Fortunat inwardly cursed this, to him, most unseasonable discretion. But he was experienced in these examinations, and he had at his command little tricks for loosening tongues, which even an investigating magistrate might have envied. Without seeming to attach the slightest importance to Madame Vantrasson's narrative, he rose with a startled air, like a man who suddenly realises that he has forgotten himself. "Zounds!" he exclaimed, "we sit here gossiping, and it's growing late. I really can't wait for your husband. If I remain here any longer, I shall miss the last omnibus; and I live on the other side of the river, near the Luxembourg."

"But our agreement, monsieur?"

"We will draw that up at some future time. I shall be passing again, or I will send one of my colleagues to see you."

It was Madame Vantrasson's turn to tremble now. She feared, if she allowed this supposed clerk to go without signing the agreement, that the person who came in his stead might not prove so accommodating; and even if he called again himself, he might not be so kindly disposed. "Wait just a moment longer, monsieur," she pleaded; "my husband will soon be back, and the last omnibus doesn't leave the Rue de Levis until midnight."

"I wouldn't refuse, but this part of the suburbs is so lonely."

"Vantrasson will see you on your way." And resolved to detain him at any cost, she poured out a fresh glass of liquor for him, and said: "Where were we? Oh, yes! I was about to tell you Mademoiselle Hermine's story."

Concealing his delight with an assumed air of resignation, M. Fortunat reseated himself, to the intense disgust of Chupin, who was thoroughly tired of waiting outside in the cold.

"I must tell you," began Madame Vantrasson, "that when this happened—at least twenty-five years ago—the De Chalusse family lived in the Rue Saint-Dominique. They occupied a superb mansion, with extensive grounds, full of splendid trees like those in the Tuileries gardens. Mademoiselle Hermine, who was then about eighteen or nineteen years old, was, according to all accounts, the prettiest young creature ever seen. Her skin was

as white as milk, she had a profusion of golden hair, and her eyes were as blue as forget-me-nots. She was very kind and generous, they say, only, like all the rest of the family, she was very haughty and obstinate—oh, obstinate enough to allow herself to be roasted alive over a slow fire rather than yield an inch. That's the count's nature exactly. Having served him, I know something about it, to be sure, and—"

"Excuse me," interrupted M. Fortunat, who was determined to prevent these digressions, "and Mademoiselle Hermine?"

"I was coming to her. Although she was very beautiful and immensely rich, she had no suitors—for it was generally understood that she was to marry a marquis, whose father was a particular friend of the family. The parents had arranged the matter between them years before, and nothing was wanting but the young lady's consent; but Mademoiselle Hermine absolutely refused to hear the marquis's name mentioned. They did everything to persuade her to consent to this marriage; they employed prayers and threats alike, but they might as well have talked to a stone. When they asked her why she refused to marry the marquis, she replied, 'Because'—and that was all. In fact, at last she declared she would leave home and take refuge in a convent, if they didn't cease to torment her. Her relatives were certain there must be some reason for her refusal. It isn't natural for a girl to reject a suitor who is young, handsome, rich, and a marquis besides. Her friends suspected there was something she wouldn't confess; and M. Raymond swore that he would watch his sister, and discover her secret."

"M. Raymond is the present Count de Chalusse, I suppose?" inquired M. Fortunat.

"Yes, monsieur. Such was the state of matters when, one night, the gardener thought he heard a noise in the pavilion, at the end of the garden. This pavilion was very large. I have seen it. It contained a sitting-room, a billiard-room, and a large fencing-hall. Naturally enough, the gardener got up to go and see what was the matter. As he left the house, he fancied he saw two persons moving about among the trees. He ran after them, but could find nothing. They had made their escape through a small gate leading from the garden into the street. When the gardener was telling me this story, he declared again and again that he had fancied the noise he had heard was made by some of the servants trying to leave the house secretly, and for this reason he didn't give the alarm. However, he hurried to the pavilion, but on seeing no light there, he went back to bed with an easy mind."

"And it was Mademoiselle Hermine eloping with a lover?" asked M. Fortunat.

Madame Vantrasson seemed as disappointed as an actor who has been deprived of an opportunity of producing a grand effect. "Wait a moment," she replied, "and you'll see. The night passed, morning came, and then the breakfast hour. But Mademoiselle Hermine did not make her appearance. Some one was sent to rap at her door—there was no answer. The door was opened—the young lady was not in her room, and the bed had not even been disturbed. In a few moments the whole household was in the wildest commotion; the mother weeping, and the father half wild with rage and sorrow. Of course, the next thought was of Mademoiselle Hermine's brother, and he was sent for. But he, too, was not in his room, and his bed had not been touched. The excitement was becoming frenzy, when it occurred to the gardener to mention what he had heard and seen on the previous night. They hastened to the pavilion, and discovered what?

Why, M. Raymond stretched upon the ground, stiff, cold, and motionless, weltering in his own blood. One of his rigid hands still grasped a sword. They lifted him up, carried him to the house, laid him upon his bed, and sent for a physician. He had received two dangerous wounds; one in the throat, the other in the breast. For more than a month he hung between life and death, and six weeks elapsed before he had strength to relate what had happened. He was lighting a cigar at his window when he thought he saw a woman's form flit through the garden. A suspicion that it might be his sister flashed through his mind; so he hastened down, stole noiselessly into the pavilion, and there he found his sister and a young man who was absolutely unknown to him. He might have killed the intruder, but instead of doing so, he told him they would fight then and there. Weapons were within reach, and they fought, with the result that Raymond was wounded twice, in quick succession, and fell. His adversary, supposing him dead, thereupon fled from the spot, taking Mademoiselle Hermine with him."

At this point in her narrative Madame Vantrasson evinced a desire to pause and draw a breath, and perhaps partake of some slight refreshment; but M. Fortunat was impatient. The woman's husband might return at any moment. "And, after that?" he inquired.

"After that—well—M. Raymond recovered, and in about three months' time he was out again; but the parents, who were old folks, had received their death blow. They never rallied from the shock. Perhaps they felt that it was their own hard-heartedness and obstinacy that had caused their daughter's ruin—and remorse is hard to bear. They waned perceptibly from day to day, and during the following year they were borne to the cemetery within two months of each other."

From the spurious clerk's demeanour it was easy to see that he had ceased thinking about his omnibus, and his hostess felt both reassured and flattered. "And Mademoiselle Hermine?" he inquired, eagerly.

"Alas! monsieur, no one ever knew where she went, or what became of her."

"Didn't they try to find her?"

"They searched for her everywhere, for I don't know how long; all the ablest detectives in France and in foreign countries tried to find her, but not one of them succeeded in discovering the slightest trace of her whereabouts. M. Raymond promised an enormous sum to the man who would find his sister's betrayer. He wished to kill him, and he sought for him for years; but all in vain."

"And did they never receive any tidings of this unfortunate girl?"

"I was told that they heard from her twice. On the morning following her flight her parents received a letter, in which she implored their forgiveness. Five or six months later, she wrote again to say that she knew her brother was not dead. She confessed that she was a wicked, ungrateful girl—that she had been mad; but she said that her punishment had come, and it was terrible. She added that every link was severed between herself and her friends, and she hoped they would forget her as completely as if she had never existed. She went so far as to say that her children should never know who their mother was, and that never in her life again would she utter the name which she had so disgraced."

It was the old, sad story of a ruined girl paying for a moment's madness with her happiness and all her after life. A terrible drama, no doubt; but one that is of such frequent occurrence that it seems as commonplace

as life itself. Thus any one who was acquainted with M. Isidore Fortunat would have been surprised to see how greatly he was moved by such a trifle. "Poor girl!" said he, in view of saying something. And then, in a tone of assumed carelessness, he inquired: "Did they never discover what scoundrel carried Mademoiselle de Chalusse away?"

"Never. Who he was, whence he came, whether he was young or old, how he became acquainted with Mademoiselle Hermine—these questions were never answered. It was rumoured at one time that he was an American, a captain in the navy; but that was only a rumour. To tell the truth, they never even discovered his name."

"What, not even his name?"

"Not even his name."

Unable to master his emotion, M. Fortunat had at least the presence of mind to rise and step back into the darker part of the shop. But his gesture of disappointment and the muttered oath that fell from his lips did not escape Madame Vantrasson. She was startled, and from that moment she looked upon the supposed clerk with evident distrust. It was not long before he again resumed his seat nearer the counter, still a trifle pale, perhaps, but apparently calm. Two questions more seemed indispensable to him, and yet either one of them would be sure to arouse suspicion. Nevertheless, he resolved to incur the risk of betraying himself. And, after all, what would it matter now? Did he not possess the information he had wished for, at least as much of it as it was in this woman's power to impart? "I can scarcely tell you, my dear madame, how much your narrative has interested me," he began. "I can confess now that I am slightly acquainted with the Count de Chalusse, and that I have frequently visited the house in the Rue de Courcelles, where he now resides."

"You!" exclaimed the woman, taking a hasty inventory of M. Fortunat's toilette.

"Yes, I—on the part of my employer, understand. Each time I've been to visit M. de Chalusse's I've seen a young lady whom I took for his daughter there. I was wrong, no doubt, since he isn't a married man—"

He paused. Astonishment and anger seemed to be almost suffocating his hostess. Without understanding how or why, she felt convinced that she had been duped; and if she had obeyed her first impulse she would have attacked M. Isidore then and there. If she restrained this impulse, if she made an effort to control herself, it was only because she thought she held a better revenge in reserve.

"A young lady in the count's house!" she said, thoughtfully. "That's scarcely possible. I've never seen her; I've never heard her spoken of. How long has she been there?"

"For six or seven months?"

"In that case, I can't absolutely deny it. It's two years since I set foot in the count's house."

"I fancied this young lady might be the count's niece—Mademoiselle Hermine's daughter."

Madame Vantrasson shook her head. "Put that fancy out of your head," she remarked. "The count said that his sister was dead to him from the evening of her flight."

"Who *can* this young girl be, then?"

"Bless me! I don't know. What sort of a looking person is she?"

"Very tall; a brunette."

"How old is she?"

"Eighteen or nineteen."

The woman made a rapid calculation on her fingers. "Nine and four are thirteen," she muttered, "and five are eighteen. Ah, ha!—why not? I must look into this."

"What did you say?"

"Nothing; a little reflection I was making to myself. Do you know this young lady's name?"

"It's Marguerite."

The woman's face clouded. "No; it can't be then," she muttered, in a scarcely audible voice.

M. Fortunat was on coals of fire. It was evident that this frightful creature, even if she knew nothing definite, had some idea, some vague suspicion of the truth. How could he compel her to speak now that she was on her guard? He had not time to ascertain, for the door suddenly opened, and Vantrasson appeared on the threshold. He was scarcely sober when he left the shop, but now he was fairly drunk; his heavy shamble had become a stagger. "Oh, you wretch, you brigand!" howled his wife; "you've been drinking again!"

He succeeded in maintaining his equilibrium, and, gazing at her with the phlegmatic stare peculiar to intoxicated men, he replied: "Well, what of that! Can't I have a little pleasure with my friends? I came across a couple of men who were just taking their fifteenth glass; why should I refuse a compliment?"

"You can't hold yourself up."

"That's true." And to prove it he tumbled on to a chair.

A torrent of abuse now flowed from Madame Vantrasson's lips! M. Fortunat only imperfectly distinguished the words "thief," "spy," and "detective;" but he could not mistake the meaning of the looks which she alternately gave her husband and himself. "It's a fortunate thing for you that my husband is in this condition," her glances plainly implied, "otherwise there would be an explanation, and then we should see—"

"I've had a lucky escape," thought the spurious clerk. But as matters stood there was nothing to fear. It was a case where one could show a brave front to the enemy without incurring the slightest danger. "Let your husband alone," said he. "If he has only brought the paper that he was sent to fetch, I shan't have lost my evening to oblige you."

Vantrasson had brought not one sheet of stamped paper, but two. A bad pen and some muddy ink were produced, and M. Fortunat began to draw up an acknowledgment according to the established formula. However, it was necessary to mention the name of the creditor of whom he had spoken, and not wishing to state his own, he used that of poor Victor Chupin, who was at that very moment shivering at the door, little suspecting what liberty was being taken with his cognomen.

"Chupin!" repeated the vixen, as if to engrave the name on her memory; "Victor Chupin! I should just like to see him," she added, viciously.

When the document was finished, it became necessary to wake Vantrasson, so that he might sign it. He did so with very good grace, and his wife appended her signature beside her husband's. Thereupon M. Fortunat gave them in exchange the note which had served as a pretext for his visit. "And above all," he remarked, as he opened the door to go, "don't forget that you are to pay something on account each month."

"Go to the devil, and your account with you!" growled Madame Vantrasson.

But Fortunat did not hear this. He was already walking down the road by the side of Chupin, who was saying: "Well, here you are, at last, m'sieur! I thought you had taken a lease of that old barrack. If ever I come here again, I'll bring a foot-warmer with me."

But one of those fits of profound abstraction to which determined seekers after truth are subject had taken possession of M. Fortunat, and made him oblivious of all surrounding circumstances. His heart had been full of hope when he reached the Asnières Road, but he went away gloomy and despondent; and quite unconscious of the darkness, the mud, and the rain, which was again falling, he silently plodded along in the middle of the highway. Chupin was obliged to stop him at the city-gate, and remind him that the cab was waiting.

"That's true," was M. Fortunat's only answer. He entered the vehicle, certainly without knowing it; and as they rolled homeward, the thoughts that filled his brain to overflowing found vent in a sort of monologue, of which Chupin now and then caught a few words. "What a piece of business!" he muttered—"what a piece of business! I've had seven years' experience in such matters, and yet I've never met with an affair so shrouded in mystery. My forty thousand francs are in a precarious condition. Certainly I've lost money before through heirs whose existence I hadn't even suspected; but by reinstating these same heirs in their rights, I've regained my lost money, and received a handsome reward in addition; but in this case all is darkness; there isn't a single gleam of light—not the slightest clew. If I could only find them! But how can I search for people whose names I don't even know—for people who have escaped all the inquiries of the police? And where shall I look for them—in Europe, in America? It would be sheer madness! To whom, then, will the count's millions go?"

It was only the sudden stoppage of the cab in front of his own door that recalled M. Fortunat to the realities of life. "Here are twenty francs, Victor," he said to Chupin. "Pay the driver, and keep the rest yourself."

As he spoke, he sprang nimbly to the ground. A handsome brougham, drawn by two horses, was standing before the house. "The Marquis de Valorsay's carriage," muttered M. Fortunat. "He has been very patient; he has waited for me—or, rather, he has waited for my ten thousand francs. Well, we shall see."

III.

M. Fortunat had scarcely started off on his visit to the Vantrassons when the Marquis de Valorsay reached the Place de la Bourse.

"Monsieur has gone out," said Madame Dodelin, as she opened the door.

"You must be mistaken, my good woman."

"No, no; my master said you would, perhaps, wait for him."

"Very well; I will do so."

Faithful to the orders she had received, the servant conducted the visitor to the drawing-room, lit the tapers in the candelabra, and retired. "This is very strange!" growled the marquis. "Monsieur Fortunat makes an appointment, Monsieur Fortunat expects me to wait for him! What will happen next?" However, he drew a newspaper from his pocket, threw himself into an arm-chair, and waited.

By his habits and tastes, the Marquis de Valorsay belonged to that section of the aristocracy which has coined the term "high life" in view of

describing its own manners and customs. The matters that engrossed the marquis's frivolous mind were club-life and first performances at the opera and the leading theatres, social duties and visits to the fashionable watering-places, racing and the shooting and hunting seasons, together with his mistress and his tailor.

He considered that to ride in a steeple-chase was an act of prowess worthy of his ancestors; and when he galloped past the stand, clad as a jockey, in top-boots and a violet silk jacket, he believed he read admiration in every eye. This was his everyday life, which had been enlivened by a few salient episodes: two duels, an elopement with a married woman, a twenty-six hours *séance* at the gaming table, and a fall from his horse, while hunting, which nearly cost him his life. These acts of valour had raised him considerably in the estimation of his friends, and procured him a celebrity of which he was not a little proud. The newspaper reporters were constantly mentioning his name, and the sporting journals never failed to chronicle his departure from Paris or his arrival in the city.

Unfortunately, such a life of busy idleness has its trials and its vicissitudes, and M. de Valorsay was a living proof of this. He was only thirty-three, but in spite of the care he expended upon his toilet, he looked at least forty. Wrinkles were beginning to show themselves; it required all the skill of his valet to conceal the bald spots on his cranium; and since his fall from his horse, he had been troubled by a slight stiffness in his right leg, which stiffness became perfect lameness in threatening weather. Premature lassitude pervaded his entire person, and when he relaxed in vigilance even his eyes betrayed a distaste for everything—weariness, satiety as it were. All the same, however, he bore himself with an undeniable air of distinction, albeit the haughtiness of his manner indicated an exaggerated idea of his own importance. He was indeed in the habit of treating all those whom he considered his inferiors with supercilious suffiecency.

The clock on M. Fortunat's mantel-shelf at last struck eleven and the marquis rose to his feet with a muttered oath. "This is too much!" he growled, angrily.

He looked about for a bell, and seeing none, he was reduced to the dire necessity of opening the door himself, and calling some one. Madame Dodelin answered the summons. "Monsieur said he would return before midnight," she replied: "so he will certainly be here. There is no one like him for punctuality. Won't monsieur have patience a little longer?"

"Well, I will wait a few moments; but, my good woman, light the fire; my feet are frozen!"

M. Fortunat's drawing-room being used but seldom, was really as frigid as an iceberg; and to make matters still worse, M. de Valorsay was in evening dress, with only a light overcoat. The servant hesitated for an instant, thinking this visitor difficult to please, and inclined to make himself very much at home, still she obeyed.

"I think I ought to go," muttered the marquis. "I really think I ought to go." And yet he remained. Necessity, it should be remembered, effectually quiets the revolts of pride.

Left an orphan in his early childhood, placed in possession of an immense fortune at the age of twenty-three, M. de Valorsay had entered life like a famished man enters a dining-room. His name entitled him to a high position in the social world; and he installed himself at table without asking how much the banquet might cost him. It cost him dear, as he discovered at the end of the first year, on noting that his disbursements had

considerably exceeded his large income. It was very evident that if he went on in this way, each twelvemonth would deepen an abyss wherein the one hundred and sixty thousand francs a year, left him by his father, would finally be swallowed up. But he had plenty of time to reflect upon this unpleasant possibility ere it could come to pass! And, besides, he found his present life so delightful, and he obtained so much gratification for his money, that he was unwilling to make any change. He possessed several fine estates, and he found plenty of men who were only too glad to lend him money on such excellent security. He borrowed timidly at first, but more boldly when he discovered what a mere trifle a mortgage is. Moreover, his wants increased in proportion to his vanity. Occupying a certain position in the opinion of his acquaintances, he did not wish to descend from the heights to which they had exalted him; and the very fact that he had been foolishly extravagant one year made it necessary for him to be guilty of similar folly during the succeeding twelvemonth. He failed to pay his creditors the interest that was due on his loans. They did not ask him for it; and perhaps he forgot that it was slowly but surely accumulating, and that at the end of a certain number of years the amount of his indebtedness would be doubled. He never thought what the end would be. He became absolutely ignorant of the condition of his affairs, and really arrived at the conclusion that his resources were inexhaustible. He believed this until one day when on going to his lawyer for some money, that gentleman coldly said: "You requested me to obtain one hundred thousand francs for you, Monsieur le Marquis—but I have only been able to procure fifty thousand—here they are. And do not hope for more. All your real estate is encumbered beyond its value. Your creditors will probably leave you in undisturbed possession for another year—it will be to their interest—but when it has elapsed they will take possession of their own, as they have a perfect right to do." Then, with a meaning smile, the smile of a wily prime minister, he added: "If I were in your place, Monsieur le Marquis, I would profit by this year of grace. You undoubtedly understand what I mean. I have the honour to wish you good-morning."

What an awakening—after a glorious dream that had lasted for ten years. M. de Valorsay was stunned—crushed. For three days he remained immured in his own room, obstinately refusing to receive any one. "The marquis is ill," was his valet's answer to every visitor.

M. de Valorsay felt that he must have time to regain his mental equilibrium—to look his situation calmly in the face. It was a frightful one, for his ruin was complete, absolute. He could save nothing from the wreck. What was to become of him? What could he do? He set his wits to work; but he found that he was incapable of plying any kind of avocation. All the energy he had been endowed with by nature had been squandered—exhausted in pandering to his self-conceit. If he had been younger he might have turned soldier; but at his age he had not even this resource. Then it was that his notary's smile recurred to his mind. "His advice was decidedly good," he muttered. "All is not yet lost; one way of escape still remains—marriage."

And why, indeed, shouldn't he marry, and marry a rich wife too? No one knew anything about his misfortune; for a year at least, he would retain all the advantages that wealth bestows upon its possessor. His name alone was a great advantage. It would be very strange if he could not find some manufacturer's or banker's daughter who would be only too delighted to have a marquisial coronet emblazoned on her carriage panels.

Having arrived at this conclusion, M. de Valorsay began his search, and it was not long before he thought he had found what he was seeking. But something was still necessary. The bestowers of large dowers are inclined to be suspicious; they like to have a clear understanding as to the financial position of the suitors who present themselves, and they not unfrequently ask for information. Accordingly, before committing himself, M. de Valorsay understood that it was necessary he should provide himself with an intelligent and devoted adviser. There must be some one to hold his creditors in check, to silence them, and obtain sundry concessions from them—in a word, some one to interest them in his success. With this object in veiw, M. de Valorsay applied to his notary; but the latter utterly refused to mix himself up in any such affair, and declared that the marquis's suggestion was almost an insult. Then touched, perhaps, by his client's apparent despair, he said, "But I can mention a person who might be of service to you. Go to M. Isidore Fortunat, No. 27 Place de la Bourse. If you succeed in interesting him in your marriage, it is an accomplished fact."

It was under these circumstances that the marquis became acquainted with M. Fortunat. M. de Valorsay was a man of no little penetration, and on his first visit he carefully weighed his new acquaintance. He found him to be the very counsellor he desired—prudent, and at the same time courageous; fertile in expedients; a thorough master of the art of evading the law, and not at all troubled by scruples. With such an adviser, it would be mere child's play to conceal his financial embarrassments and deceive the most suspicious father-in-law. So M. de Valorsay did not hesitate a moment. He frankly disclosed his pecuniary condition and his matrimonial hopes, and concluded by promising M. Fortunat a certain percentage on the bride's dowry, to be paid on the day following the marriage.

After a prolonged conference, the agreement was drawn up and signed, and that very day M. Fortunat took the nobleman's interests in hand. How heartily, and with what confidence in his success, is shown by the fact that he had advanced forty thousand francs for his client's use, out of his own private purse. After such a proof of confidence the marquis could hardly have been dissatisfied with his adviser; in point of fact he was delighted with him, and all the more so, as this invaluable man always treated him with extreme deference, verging on servility. And in M. de Valorsay's eyes this was a great consideration: for he was becoming more arrogant and more irascible in proportion as his right to be so diminished. Secretly disgusted with himself, and deeply humiliated by the shameful intrigue to which he had stooped, he took a secret satisfaction in crushing his accomplice with his imaginary superiority and lordly disdain. According as his humour was good or bad, he called him "my dear extortioner," "Mons. Fortunat," or "Master Twenty-per-cent." But though these sneers and insults drove the obsequious smile from M. Fortunat's lips, he was quite capable of including them in the bill under the head of sundries.

The unvarying deference and submission which M. de Valorsay's adviser displayed made his failure to keep the present appointment all the more remarkable. Such neglect of the commonest rules of courtesy was inconceivable on the part of so polite a man; and the marquis's anger gradually changed to anxiety. "What can have happened?" he thought.

He was trying to decide whether he should leave or stay, when he heard a key grate in the lock of the outer door, and then some quick steps along the ante-room. "At last—here he is!" he muttered, with a sigh of relief.

He expected to see M. Fortunat enter the room at once, but he was dis-

appointed. The agent had no desire to show himself in the garb which he had assumed for his excursion with Chupin; and so he had hastened to his room to don his wonted habiliments. He also desired a few moments for deliberation.

If—as was most probably the case—M. de Valorsay were ignorant of the Count de Chalusse's critical condition, was it advisable to tell him of it? M. Fortunat thought not, judging with reason that this would lead to a discussion and very possibly to a rupture, and he wished to avoid anything of the kind until he was quite certain of the count's death.

Meanwhile the marquis was thinking—he was a trifle late about it—that he had done wrong to wait in that drawing-room for three mortal hours. Was such conduct worthy of him? Had he shown himself proper respect? Would not M. Fortunat construe this as an acknowledgment of the importance of his services and his client's urgent need? Would he not become more exacting, more exorbitant in his demands? If the marquis could have made his escape unheard, he would, no doubt, have done so; but this was out of the question. So he resorted to a stratagem which seemed to him likely to save his compromised dignity. He stretched himself out in his arm-chair, closed his eyes, and pretended to doze. Then, when M. Fortunat at last entered the drawing-room he sprang up as if he were suddenly aroused from slumber, rubbed his eyes, and exclaimed: "Eh! what's that? Upon my word I must have been asleep!"

But M. Fortunat was not deceived. He noticed, on the floor, a torn and crumpled newspaper, which betrayed the impatience and anger his client had experienced during his long waiting. "Well," resumed the marquis, "what time is it? Half-past twelve? This is a pretty time to keep an appointment fixed for ten o'clock. This is presuming on my good-nature, M. Fortunat! Do you know that my carriage has been waiting below ever since half-past nine, and that my horses have, perhaps, taken cold? A pair of horses worth six hundred louis!"

M. Fortunat listened to these reproaches with the deepest humility. "You must excuse me, Monsieur le Marquis," said he. "If I remained out so much later than usual, it was only because your business interests detained me."

"Zounds! that is about the same as if it had been your own business that detained you!" And well pleased with this joke, he added, "Ah well! How are affairs progressing?"

"On my side as well as could be desired."

The marquis had resumed his seat in the chimney-corner, and was poking the fire with a haughty, but poorly assumed air of indifference. "I am listening," he said carelessly.

"In that case, Monsieur le Marquis, I will state the facts in a few words, without going into particulars. Thanks to an expedient devised by me, we shall obtain for twenty hours a release from all the mortgages that now encumber your estates. On that very day we will request a certificate from the recorder. This certificate will declare that your estates are free from all encumbrances; you will show this statement to M. de Chalusse, and all his doubts—that is, if he has any—will vanish. The plan was very simple; the only difficulty was about raising the money, but I have succeeded in doing so. All your creditors but two lent themselves very readily to the arrangement. I have now won the consent of the two who at first refused, but we shall have to pay dearly for it. It will cost you about twenty-six thousand francs."

M. de Valorsay was so delighted that he could not refrain from clapping his hands. "Then the affair is virtually concluded," he exclaimed. "In less than a month Mademoiselle Marguerite will be the Marquise de Valorsay, and I shall have a hundred thousand francs a year again." Then, noting how gravely M. Fortunat shook his head: "Ah! so you doubt it!" he cried. "Very well; now it is your turn to listen. Yesterday I had a long conference with the Count de Chalusse, and everything has been settled. We exchanged our word of honour, Master Twenty-per-cent. The count does things in a princely fashion; he gives Mademoiselle Marguerite two millions."

"Two millions!" the other repeated like an echo.

"Yes, my dear miser, neither more nor less. Only for private reasons, which he did not explain, the count stipulates that only two hundred thousand francs shall appear in the marriage contract. The remaining eighteen hundred thousand francs, he gives to me unreservedly and unconditionally. Upon my word, I think this very charming. How does it strike you?"

M. Fortunat made no reply. M. de Valorsay's gaiety, instead of cheering, saddened him. "Ah! my fine fellow," he thought, "you would sing a different song if you knew that by this time M. de Chalusse is probably dead, and that most likely Mademoiselle Marguerite has only her beautiful eyes left her, and will dim them in weeping for her vanished millions."

But this brilliant scion of the aristocracy had no suspicion of the real state of affairs, for he continued: "You will say, perhaps, it is strange, that I, Ange-Marie Robert Dalbou, Marquis de Valorsay, should marry a girl whose father and mother no one knows, and whose only name is Marguerite. In this respect it is true that the match is not exactly a brilliant one. Still, as it will appear that she merely has a fortune of two hundred thousand francs, no one will accuse me of marrying for money on the strength of my name. On the contrary, it will seem to be a love-match, and people will suppose that I have grown young again." He paused, incensed by M. Fortunat's lack of enthusiasm. "Judging from your long face, Master Twenty-per-cent, one would fancy you doubted my success," he said.

"It is always best to doubt," replied his adviser, philosophically.

The marquis shrugged his shoulders. "Even when one has triumphed over all obstacles?" he asked sneeringly.

"Yes."

"Then, tell me, if you please, what prevents this marriage from being a foregone conclusion?"

"Mademoiselle Marguerite's consent, Monsieur le Marquis."

It was as if a glass of ice-water had been thrown in M. de Valorsay's face. He started, turned as pale as death, and then exclaimed: "I shall have that; I am sure of it."

You could not say that M. Fortunat was angry. Such a man, as cold and as smooth as a hundred franc piece, has no useless passions. But he was intensely irritated to hear his client foolishly chanting the pæons of victory, while he was compelled to conceal his grief at the loss of his forty thousand francs, deep in the recesses of his heart. So, far from being touched by the marquis's evident alarm, it pleased him to be able to turn the dagger in the wound he had just inflicted. "You must excuse my incredulity," said he. "It comes entirely from something you, yourself, told me about a week ago."

"What did I tell you?"

"That you suspected Mademoiselle Marguerite of a—how shall I express it?—of a secret preference for some other person."

The gloomiest despondency had now followed the marquis's enthusiasm and exultation. He was evidently in torture. "I more than suspected it," said he.

"Ah!"

"I was certain of it, thanks to the count's housekeeper, Madame Léon, a miserable old woman whom I have hired to look after my interests. She has been watching Mademoiselle Marguerite, and saw a letter written by her—"

"Oh!"

"Certainly nothing has passed that Mademoiselle Marguerite has any cause to blush for. The letter, which is now in my possession, contains unmistakeable proofs of that. She might proudly avow the love she has inspired, and which she undoubtedly returns. Yet—"

M. Fortunat's gaze was so intent that it became unbearable. "You see, then," he began, "that I had good cause to fear—"

Exasperated beyond endurance, M de Valorsay sprang up so violently that he overturned his chair. "No!" he exclaimed, "no, a thousand times no! You are wrong—for the man who loves Mademoiselle Marguerite is now ruined. Yes, such is really the case. While we are sitting here, at this very moment, he is lost—irredeemably lost. Between him and the woman whom I wish to marry—whom I *shall* marry—I have dug so broad and deep an abyss that the strongest love cannot overleap it. It is better and worse than if I had killed him. Dead, he would have been mourned, perhaps; while now, the lowest and most degraded woman would turn from him in disgust, or, even if she loved him, she would not dare to confess it."

M. Fortunate seemed greatly disturbed. "Have you then put into execution the project—the plan you spoke of?" he faltered. "I thought you were only jesting."

The marquis lowered his head. "Yes," he answered.

His companion stood for a moment as if petrified, and then suddenly exclaimed: "What! You have done that—you—a gentleman?"

M. de Valorsay paced the floor in a state of intense agitation. Had he caught a glimpse of his own face in the looking-glass, it would have frightened him. "A gentleman!" he repeated, in a tone of suppressed rage; "a gentleman! That word is in everybody's mouth, nowadays. Pray, what do you understand by a gentleman, Mons. Fortunat? No doubt, you mean a heroic idiot who passes through life with a lofty mien, clad in all the virtues, as stoical as Job, and as resigned as a martyr—a sort of moral Don Quixote, preaching the austerest virtue, and practising it? But, unfortunately, nobility of soul and of purpose are expensive luxuries, and I am a ruined man. I am no saint! I love life and all that makes life beautiful and desirable—and to procure its pleasures I must fight with the weapons of the age. No doubt, it is grand to be honest; but in my case it is so impossible, that I prefer to be dishonest—to commit an act of shameful infamy which will yield a hundred thousand francs a year. This man is in my way—I suppress him—so much the worse for him—he has no business to be in my way. If I could have met him openly, I would have dispatched him according to the accepted code of honour; but, then, I should have had to renounce all idea of marrying Mademoiselle Marguerite,

so I was obliged to find some other way. I could not choose my means. The drowning man does not reject the plank, which is his only chance of salvation, because it chances to be dirty."

His gestures were even more forcible than his words; and when he concluded, he threw himself on to the sofa, holding his head tightly between his hands, as if he felt that it was bursting. Anger choked his utterance —not anger so much as something he would not confess, the quickening of his own conscience and the revolt of every honourable instinct; for, in spite of his sins of omission, and of commission, never, until this day, had he actually violated any clause of the code acknowledged by men of honour.

"You have been guilty of a most infamous act, Monsieur le Marquis," said M. Fortunat, coldly.

"Oh! no moralizing, if you please."

"Only evil will come of it."

The marquis shrugged his shoulders, and in a tone of bitter scorn, retorted: "Come, Mons. Fortunat, if you wish to lose the forty thousand francs you advanced to me, it's easy enough to do so. Run to Madame d' Argclès' house, ask for M. de Coralth, and tell him I countermand my order. My rival will be saved, and will marry Mademoiselle Marguerite and her millions."

M. Fortunat remained silent. He could not tell the marquis: "My forty thousand francs are lost already. I know that only too well. Mademoiselle Marguerite is no longer the possessor of millions, and you have committed a useless crime." However, it was this conviction which imparted such an accent of eagerness to his words as he continued to plead the cause of virtue and of honesty. Would he have said as much if he had entertained any great hope of the success of the marquis's matrimonial enterprise? It is doubtful, still we must do M. Fortunat the justice to admit that he was really and sincerely horrified by what he had unhesitatingly styled an "infamous act."

The marquis listened to his agent for a few moments in silence, and then rose to his feet again. "All this is very true," he interrupted; "but I am, nevertheless, anxious to learn the result of my little plot. For this reason, Monsieur Fortunat, give me at once the five hundred louis you promised me, and I will then bid you good evening."

The agent had been preparing himself for this moment, and yet he trembled. "I am deeply grieved, monsieur," he replied, with a doleful smile; "it was this matter that kept me out so much later than usual this evening. I hoped to have obtained the money from a banker, who has always accommodated me before—M. Prosper Bertomy, you know him: he married M. André Fauvel's niece— "

"Yes, I know; proceed, if you please."

"Ah well! it was impossible for me to procure the money."

The marquis had hitherto been pale, but now his face flushed crimson. "This is a jest, I suppose," said he.

"Alas!—unfortunately—no."

There was a moment's silence, which the marquis probably spent in reflecting upon the probable consequences of this disappointment, for it was in an almost threatening tone that he eventually exclaimed: "You know that I must have this money at once—that I *must* have it."

M. Fortunat would certainly have preferred to lose a good pound of flesh rather than the sum of money mentioned; but, on the other hand, he felt that it would not do for him to sever his connection with his client until

the death of the Count de Chalusse was certain ; and being anxious to save his money and to keep his client, his embarrassment was extreme. "It was the most unfortunate thing in the world," he stammered ; "I apprehended no difficulty whatever—" Then, suddenly clapping his hand to his forehead, he exclaimed : "But, Monsieur le Marquis, couldn't you borrow this amount from one of your friends, the Duke de Champdoce or the Count de Commarin?—that would be a good idea."

M. de Valorsay was anything but unsophisticated, and his natural shrewdness had been rendered much more acute by the difficulties with which he had recently been obliged to contend. M. Fortunat's confusion had not escaped his keen glance ; and this last suggestion aroused his suspicions at once. "What!" he said, slowly, and with an air of evident distrust. "*You* give me this advice, Master Twenty-per-cent. This is wonderful! How long is it since your opinions have undergone such a change?"

"My opinions?"

"Yes. Didn't you say to me during our first interview : 'The thing that will save you, is that you have never in your whole life borrowed a louis from a friend. An ordinary creditor only thinks of a large interest ; and if that is paid him he holds his peace. A friend is never satisfied until everybody knows that he has generously obliged you. It is far better to apply to a usurer.' I thought all that very sensible, and I quite agreed with you when you added : 'So, Monsieur le Marquis, no borrowing of this kind until after your marriage—not on any pretext whatever. Go without eating rather than do it. Your credit is still good ; but it is being slowly undermined—and the indiscretion of a friend who chanced to say : "I think Valorsay is hard up," might fire the train, and then you'd explode.'"

M. Fortunat's embarrassment was really painful to witness. He was not usually wanting in courage, but the events of the evening had shaken his confidence and his composure. The hope of gain and the fear of loss had deprived him of his wonted clearness of mind. Feeling that he had just committed a terrible blunder, he racked his brain to find some way of repairing it, and finding none, his confusion increased.

"Did you, or didn't you, use that language?" insisted M. de Valorsay. "What have you to say in reply?"

"Circumstances—"

"What circumstances?"

"Urgent need—necessity. There is no rule without its exceptions. I did not imagine you would be so rash. I have advanced you forty thousand francs in less than five months—it is outrageous. If I were in your place, I would be more reasonable—I would economize—"

He paused ; in fact, he was compelled to pause by the piercing glance which M. de Valorsay turned upon him. He was furious with himself. "I am losing my wits," he thought.

"Still more wise counsel," remarked the ruined nobleman ironically. "While you are about it, why don't you advise me to sell my horses and carriages, and establish myself in a garret in the Rue Amelot? Such a course would seem very natural, wouldn't it? and, of course, it would inspire M. de Chalusse with boundless confidence!"

"But without going to such extremes—"

"Hold your tongue!" interrupted the marquis, violently. "Better than any one else you know that I cannot retrench, although the reality no longer exists. I am condemned, cost what it may, to keep up appearances. That

is my only hope of salvation. I have gambled, given expensive suppers, indulged in dissipation of every kind, and I must continue to do so. I have come to hate Ninette Simplon, for whom I have committed so many acts of folly, and yet I still keep her—to show that I am rolling in wealth. I have thrown thousand-franc notes out of the window, and I mustn't stop throwing them. Indeed, what would people say if I stopped? Why, 'Valorsay is a ruined man!' Then, farewell to my hopes of marrying an heiress. And so I am always gay and smiling; that is part of my *rôle*. What would my servants—the twenty spies that I pay—what would they think if they saw me thoughtful or disturbed? You would scarcely believe it, M. Fortunat, but I have positively been reduced to dining on credit at my club, because I had paid, that morning, for a month's provender for my horses! It is true I have many valuable articles in my house, but I cannot dispose of them. People would recognise them at once; besides, they form a part of my stock-in-trade. An actor doesn't sell his costumes because he's hungry—he goes without food—and when it's time for the curtain to rise, he dons his satin and velvet garments, and, despite his empty stomach, he chants the praises of a bountiful table and rare old wine. That is what I am doing—I, Robert Dalbou, Marquis de Valorsay! At the races at Vincennes, about a fortnight ago, I was bowling along the boulevard behind my four-in-hand, when I heard a labourer say, 'How happy those rich people must be!' Happy, indeed! Why, I envied him his lot. He was sure that the morrow would be like the day that preceded it. On that occasion my entire fortune consisted of a single louis, which I had won at baccarat the evening before. As I entered the enclosure, Isabelle, the flower-girl, handed me a rose for my button-hole. I gave her my louis—but I longed to strangle her!"

He paused for a moment, and then, in a frenzy of passion, he advanced towards M. Fortunat, who instinctively retreated into the protecting embrasure of a window. "And for eight months I have lived this horrible life!" he resumed. "For eight months each moment has been so much torture. Ah! better poverty, prison, and shame! And now, when the prize is almost won, actuated either by treason or caprice, you try to make all my toil and all my suffering unavailing. You try to thwart me on the very threshold of success! No! I swear, by God's sacred name, it shall not be! I will rather crush you, you miserable scoundrel—crush you like a venomous reptile!"

There was such a ring of fury in his voice that the crystals of the candelabra vibrated; and Madame Dodelin, in her kitchen, heard it, and shuddered. "Some one will certainly do M. Fortunat an injury one of these days," she thought.

It was not by any means the first time that M. Fortunat had found himself at variance with clients of a sanguine temperament: but he had always escaped safe and sound, so that, after all, he was not particularly alarmed in the present instance, as was proved by the fact that he was still calm enough to reflect and plan. "In forty-eight hours I shall be certain of the count's fate," he thought; "he will be dead, or he will be in a fair way to recovery—so by promising to give this frenzied man what he desires on the day after to-morrow, I shall incur no risk."

Taking advantage of an opportunity which M. de Valorsay furnished, on pausing to draw breath, he hastily exclaimed, "Really, Monsieur le Marquis, I cannot understand your anger."

"What! scoundrel!"

"Excuse me. Before insulting me, permit me to explain—"

"No explanation—five hundred louis!"

"Have the kindness to allow me to finish. Yes, I know that you are in urgent need of money—not by-and-by, but now. To-day I was unable to procure it, nor can I promise it to-morrow; but on the day after to-morrow, Saturday, I shall certainly have it ready for you."

The marquis seemed to be trying to read his agent's very soul. "Are you in earnest?" he asked. "Show your hand. If you don't intend to help me out of my embarrassment, say so."

"Ah, Monsieur le Marquis, am I not as much interested in your success as you yourself can be? Have you not received abundant proofs of my devotion?"

"Then I can rely upon you?"

"Absolutely." And seeing a lingering doubt in his client's eyes, M. Fortunat added, "You have my word of honour!"

The clock struck three. The marquis took his hat and started towards the door. But M. Fortunat, in whose heart the word scoundrel was still rankling, stopped him. "Are you going to that lady's house now? What is she called? I've forgotten her name. Ah, yes, I remember now. Madame d'Argelès, isn't she called? It's at her place, I believe, that the reputation of Mademoiselle Marguerite's favoured lover is to be ruined."

The marquis turned angrily. "What do you take me for, Master Twenty-per-cent," he rudely asked. "That is one of those things no well-bred gentleman will do himself. But in Paris people can be found to do any kind of dirty work, if you are willing to pay them for it."

"Then how will you know the result?"

"Why, twenty minutes after the affair is over, M. de Coralth will be at my house. He is there even now, perhaps." And as this subject was anything but pleasant, he hastened away, exclaiming, "Get to bed, my dear extortioner. *Au revoir.* And, above all, remember your promise."

"My respects, Monsieur le Marquis."

But when the door closed, M. Fortunat's expression immediately changed. "Ah! you insult me!" he muttered sullenly. "You rob me, and you call me a scoundrel into the bargain. You shall pay dearly for it, my fine fellow, no matter what may happen!"

IV.

It is in vain that the law has endeavoured to shield private life from prying eyes. The scribes who pander to Parisian curiosity surmount all obstacles and brave every danger. Thanks to the "High Life" reporters, every newspaper reader is aware that twice a week—Mondays and Thursdays—Madame Lia d'Argelès holds a reception at her charming mansion in the Rue de Berry. Her guests find plenty of amusement there. They seldom dance; but card-playing begins at midnight, and a dainty supper is served before the departure of the guests.

It was on leaving one of these little entertainments that that unfortunate young man, Jules Chazel, a cashier in a large banking-house, committed suicide by blowing out his brains. The brilliant frequenters of Madame d'Argelès's entertainments considered this act proof of exceeding bad taste and deplorable weakness on his part. "The fellow was a coward," they declared. "Why, he had lost hardly a thousand louis!"

He had lost only that, it is true—a mere trifle as times go. Only the money was not his; he had taken it from the safe which was confided to his keeping, expecting, probably, to double the amount in a single night. In the morning, when he found himself alone, without a penny, and the deficit staring him in the face, the voice of conscience cried, "You are a thief!" and he lost his reason.

The event created a great sensation at the time, and the *Petit Journal* published a curious story concerning this unfortunate young man's mother. The poor woman—she was a widow—sold all she possessed, even the bed on which she slept, and when she had succeeded in gathering together twenty thousand francs—the ransom of her son's honour—she carried them to the banker by whom her boy had been employed. He took them, without even asking the mother if she had enough left to purchase her dinner that evening; and the fine gentlemen, who had won and pocketed Jules Chazel's stolen gold, thought the banker's conduct perfectly natural and just. It is true that Madame d'Argelès was in despair during forty-eight hours or so; for the police had begun a sort of investigation, and she feared this might frighten her visitors and empty her drawing-rooms. Not at all, however; on the contrary, she had good cause to congratulate herself upon the notoriety she gained through this suicide. For five days she was the talk of Paris, and Alfred d'Aunay even published her portrait in the *Illustrated Chronicle*.

Still, no one was able to say exactly who Madame Lia d'Argelès was. Who was she, and whence did she come? How had she lived until she sprang up, full grown, in the sunshine of the fashionable world? Did the splendid mansion in the Rue de Berry really belong to her? Was she as rich as she was supposed to be? Where had she acquired such manners, the manners of a thorough woman of the world, with her many accomplishments, as well as her remarkable skill as a musician? Everything connected with her was a subject of conjecture, even to the name inscribed upon her visiting cards—"Lia d'Argelès."

But no matter. Her house was always filled to overflowing; and at the very moment when the Marquis de Valorsay and M. Fortunat were speaking of her, a dozen coroneted carriages stood before her door, and her rooms were thronged with guests. It was a little past midnight, and the bi-weekly card party had just been made up, when a footman announced, "Monsieur le Vicomte de Coralth! Monsieur Pascal Ferailleur!"

Few of the players deigned to raise their heads. But one man growled, "Good—two more players!" And four or five young men exclaimed, 'Ah! here's Ferdinand! Good evening, my dear fellow!"

M. de Coralth was very young and remarkably good-looking, almost too good-looking, indeed; for his handsomeness was somewhat startling and unnatural. He had an exceedingly fair complexion, and large, melting black eyes, while a woman might have envied him his wavy brown hair and the exquisite delicacy of his skin. He dressed with great care and taste, and even coquettishly; his turn-down collar left his firm white throat uncovered, and his rose-tinted gloves fitted as perfectly as the skin upon his soft, delicate hands. He bowed familiarly on entering, and with a rather complacent smile on his lips, he approached Madame d'Argelès, who, half reclining in an easy chair near the fire-place, was conversing with two elderly gentlemen of grave and distinguished bearing. "How late you are, viscount," she remarked carelessly. "What have you been doing to-day? I fancied I saw you in the Bois, in the Marquis de Valorsay's dog-cart."

A slight flush suffused M. de Coralth's cheeks, and to hide it, perhaps, he turned towards the visitor who had entered with him, and drew him towards Madame d'Argelès, saying, "Allow me, madame, to present to you one of my great friends, M. Pascal Ferailleur, an advocate whose name will be known to fame some day."

"Your friends are always welcome at my house, my dear viscount," replied Madame d'Argelès. And before Pascal had coucluded his bow, she averted her head, and resumed her interrupted conversation.

The new-comer, however, was worthy of more than that cursory notice. He was a young man of five or six-and-twenty, dark-complexioned and tall; each movement of his person was imbued with that natural grace which is the result of perfect harmony of the muscles, and of more than common vigour. His features were irregular, but they gave evidence of energy, kindness of heart, and honesty of purpose. A man possessing such a proud, intelligent, and open brow, such a clear, straightforward gaze, and such finely-cut lips, could be no ordinary one. Deserted by his sponsor, who was shaking hands right and left, he seated himself on a sofa a little in the background; not because he was embarrassed, but because he felt that instinctive distrust of self which frequently seizes hold of a person on entering a crowd of strangers. He did his best to conceal his curiosity, but nevertheless he looked and listened with all his might.

The *salon* was an immense apartment, divided into two rooms by sliding doors and hangings. When Madame d'Argelès gave a ball, the rooms were thrown into one; but, as a general rule, one room was occupied by the card-players, and the other served as a refuge for those who wished to chat. The card-room, into which Pascal had been ushered, was an apartment of noble proportions, furnished in a style of tasteful magnificence. The tints of the carpet were subdued; there was not too much gilding on the cornices; the clock upon the mantel-shelf was chaste and elegant in design. The only thing at all peculiar about the room and its appointments was a reflector, ingeniously arranged above the chandelier in such a way as to throw the full glare of the candles upon the card-table which stood directly beneath it. The table itself was adorned with a rich tapestry cover, but this was visible only at the corners, for it was covered, in turn, with a green baize cloth considerably the worse for wear. Madame d'Argelès' guests were probably not over fifty in number, but they all seemed to belong to the very best society. The majority of them were men of forty or thereabouts; several wore decorations, and two or three of the eldest were treated with marked deference. Certain well-known names which Pascal overheard surprised him greatly. "What! these men here?" he said to himself; "and I—I regarded my visit as a sort of clandestine frolic."

There were only seven or eight ladies present, none of them being especially attractive. Their toilettes were very costly, but in rather doubtful taste, and they wore a profusion of diamonds. Pascal noticed that these ladies were treated with perfect indifference, and that, whenever the gentlemen spoke to them, they assumed an air of politeness which was too exaggerated not to be ironical.

A score of persons were seated at the card-table, and the guests who had retired into the adjoining *salon* were silently watching the progress of the game, or quietly chatting in the corners of the room. It surprised him to note that every one spoke in very low tones; there was something very like respect, even awe, in this subdued murmur. One might have supposed that those present were celebrating the rites of some mysterious worship.

And is not gaming a species of idolatry, symbolised by cards, and which has its images, its fetishes, its miracles, its fanatics, and its martyrs?

Occasionally, above the accompaniment of whispers, rose the strange and incoherent exclamations of the players: "Here are twenty louis! I take it—I pass! The play is made! *Banco*!"

"What a strange gathering!" thought Pascal Ferailleur. "What singular people!" And he turned his attention to the mistress of the house, as if he hoped to decipher the solution of the enigma on her face.

But Madame Lia d'Argelès defied all analysis. She was one of those women whose uncertain age varies according to their mood, between the thirties and the fifties; one who did not look over thirty in the evening, but who would have been charged with being more than fifty the next morning. In her youth she must have been very beautiful, and she was still good-looking, though she had grown somewhat stout, and her face had become a trifle heavy, thus marring the symmetry of her very delicate features. A perfect blonde, she had eyes of so clear a blue that they seemed almost faded. The whiteness of her skin was so unnatural that it almost startled one. It was the dull, lifeless white which suggests an excessive use of cosmetics and rice powder, and long baths, late hours, and sleep at day-time, in a darkened room. Her face was utterly devoid of expression. One might have fancied that its muscles had become relaxed after terrible efforts to feign or to conceal some violent emotions; and there was something melancholy, almost terrifying in the eternal, and perhaps involuntary smile, which curved her lips. She wore a dress of black velvet, with slashed sleeves and bodice, a new design of the famous man-millliner, Van Klopen.

Pascal was engaged in these observations when M. de Coralth, having made his round, came and sat down on the sofa beside him. "Well, what do you think of it?" he inquired.

"Upon my word!" replied the young advocate, "I am infinitely obliged to you for inviting me to accompany you here. I am intensely amused."

"Good! My philosopher is captivated."

"Not captivated, but interested, I confess." Then, in the tone of good-humour which was habitual to him, he added: "As for being the sage you call me, that's all nonsense. And to prove it, I'm going to risk my louis with the rest."

M. de Coralth seemed amazed, but a close observer might have detected a gleam of triumph in his eyes. "You are going to play—you?"

"Yes. Why not?"

"Take care!"

"Of what, pray? The worst I can do is to lose what I have in my pocket—something over two hundred francs."

The viscount shook his head thoughtfully. "It isn't that which one has cause to fear. The devil always has a hand in this business, and the first time a man plays he's sure to win."

"And is that a misfortune?"

"Yes, because the recollection of these first winnings is sure to lure you back to the gaming-table again. You go back, you lose, you try to recover your money, and that's the end of it—you become a gambler."

Pascal Ferailleur's smile was the smile of a man who has full confidence in himself. "My brain is not so easily turned, I hope," said he. "I have the thought of my name, and the fortune I must make, as ballast for it.'

"I beseech you not to play," insisted the viscount. "Listen to me;

you don't know what this passion for play is ; the strongest and the coldest natures succumb—don't play."

He had raised his voice, as if he intended to be overheard by two guests who had just approached the sofa. They did indeed hear him. "Can I believe my own eyes and ears ! " exclaimed one of them, an elderly man. "Can this really be Ferdinand who is trying to shake the allegiance of the votaries of our noble lady—the Queen of Spades ? "

M. de Coralth turned quickly round : "Yes, it is indeed I," he answered. "I have purchased with my patrimony the right of saying : 'Distrust yourself, and don't do as I've done,' to an inexperienced friend."

The wisest counsels, given in a certain fashion, never fail to produce an effect diametrically opposed to that which they seemingly aim at. M. de Coralth's persistence, and the importance he attached to a mere trifle, could not fail to annoy the most patient man in the world, and in fact his patronising tone really irritated Pascal. "You are free, my friend, to do as you please," said he ; "but I—"

"Are you resolved ? " interrupted the viscount.

"Absolutely."

"So be it, then. You are no longer a child, and I have warned you. Let us play, then." Thereupon they approached the table ; room was made for them, and they seated themselves, Pascal being on M. Ferdinand de Coralth's right-hand side.

The guests were playing "Baccarat tournant," a game of terrible and infantile simplicity. There are no such things as skill or combination possible in it ; science and calculation are useless. Chance alone decides, and decides with the rapidity of lightning. Amateurs certainly assert that, with great coolness and long practice, one can, in a measure at least, avert prolonged ill-luck. Maybe they are right, but it is not conclusively proved. Each person takes the cards in his turn, risks what he chooses, and when his stakes are covered, deals. If he wins, he is free to follow up his vein of good-luck, or to pass the deal. When he loses, the deal passes at once to the next player on the right.

A moment sufficed for Pascal Ferailleur to learn the rules of the game. It was already Ferdinand's deal. M. de Coralth staked a hundred francs ; the bet was taken ; he dealt, lost, and handed the cards to Pascal.

The play, which had been rather timid at first—since it was necessary, as they say, to try the luck—had now become bolder. Several players had large piles of gold before them, and the heavy artillery—that is to say, bank-notes—were beginning to put in appearance. But Pascal had no false pride. "I stake a louis ! " said he.

The smallness of the sum attracted instant attention, and two or three voices replied : "Taken ! "

He dealt, and won. "Two louis ! " he said again. This wager was also taken ; he won, and his run of luck was so remarkable that, in a wonderfully short space of time, he won six hundred francs.

"Pass the deal," whispered Ferdinand, and Pascal followed this advice. "Not because I desire to keep my winnings," he whispered in M. de Coralth's ear, "but because I wish to have enough to play until the end of the evening without risking anything."

But such prudence was unnecessary so far as he was concerned. When the deal came to him again, fortune favoured him even more than before. He started with a hundred francs, and doubling them each time in six successive deals, he won more than three thousand francs.

"The devil! Monsieur is in luck."—"Zounds! And he is playing for the first time."—"That accounts for it. The inexperienced always win."

Pascal could not fail to hear these comments. The blood mantled over his cheeks, and, conscious that he was flushing, he, as usually happens, flushed still more. His good fortune embarrassed him, as was evident, and he played most recklessly. Still his good luck did not desert him; and do what he would he won—won continually. In fact, by four o'clock in the morning he had thirty-five thousand francs before him.

For some time he had been the object of close attention. "Do you know this gentleman?" inquired one of the guests.

"No. He came with Coralth."

"He is an advocate, I understand."

And all these whispered doubts and suspicions, these questions fraught with an evil significance, these uncharitable replies, grew into a malevolent murmur, which resounded in Pascal's ears and bewildered him. He was really becoming most uncomfortable, when Madame d'Argelès approached the card-table and exclaimed: "This is the third time, gentlemen, that you have been told that supper is ready. What gentleman will offer me his arm?"

There was an evident unwillingness to leave the table, but an old gentleman who had been losing heavily rose to his feet. "Yes, let us go to supper!" he exclaimed; "perhaps that will change the luck."

This was a decisive consideration. The room emptied as if by magic; and no one was left at the table but Pascal, who scarcely knew what to do with all the gold piled up before him. He succeeded, however, in distributing it in his pockets, and was about to join the other guests in the dining-room, when Madame d'Argelès abruptly barred his passage.

"I desire a word with you, monsieur," she said. Her face still retained its strange immobility, and the same stereotyped smile played about her lips. And yet her agitation was so evident that Pascal, in spite of his own uneasiness, noticed it, and was astonished by it.

"I am at your service, madame," he stammered, bowing.

She at once took his arm, and led him to the embrasure of a window. "I am a stranger to you, monsieur," she said, very hurriedly, and in very low tones, "and yet I must ask, and you must grant me, a great favour."

"Speak, madame."

She hesitated, as if at a loss for words, and then all of a sudden she said, eagerly: "You will leave this house at once, without warning any one, and while the other guests are at supper."

Pascal's astonishment changed into stupor.

"Why am I to go?" he asked.

"Because—but, no; I cannot tell you. Consider it only a caprice on my part—it is so; but I entreat you, don't refuse me. Do me this favour, and I shall be eternally grateful."

There was such an agony of supplication in her voice and her attitude, that Pascal was touched. A vague presentiment of some terrible, irreparable misfortune disturbed his own heart. Nevertheless, he sadly shook his head, and bitterly exclaimed: "You are, perhaps, not aware that I have just won over thirty thousand francs."

"Yes, I am aware of it. And this is only another, and still stronger reason why you should protect yourself against possible loss. It is well to pattern after Charlemagne * in this house. The other night, the Count

* French gamblers use this expression which they explain by the fact that Charlemagne

d'Antas quietly made his escape bareheaded. He took a thousand louis away with him, and left his hat in exchange. The count is a brave man; and far from indulging in blame, every one applauded him the next day. Come, you have decided, I see—you will go; and to be still more safe, I will show you out through the servants' hall, then no one can possibly see you."

Pascal had almost decided to yield to her entreaties; but this proposed retreat through the back-door was too revolting to his pride to be thought of for a moment. "I will never consent to such a thing," he declared. "What would they think of me? Besides I owe them their revenge and I shall give it to them."

Neither Madame d'Argelès nor Pascal had noticed M. de Coralth, who in the meantime had stolen into the room on tip-toe, and had been listening to their conversation, concealed behind the folds of a heavy curtain. He now suddenly revealed his presence. "Ah! my dear friend," he exclaimed, in a winning tone. "While I honour your scruples, I must say that I think madame is a hundred times right. If I were in your place, if I had won what you have won, I shouldn't hesitate. Others might think what they pleased; you have the money, that is the main thing."

For the second time, the viscount's intervention decided Pascal. "I shall remain," he said, resolutely.

But Madame d'Argelès laid her hand imploringly on his arm. "I entreat you, monsieur," said she. "Go now, there is still time—"

"Yes, go," said the viscount, approvingly, "it would be a most excellent move. Retreat and save the cash."

These words were like the drop which makes the cup overflow. Crimson with anger and assailed by the strangest suspicions, Pascal turned from Madame d'Argelès and hastened into the dining-room. The conversation ceased entirely on his arrival there. He could not fail to understand that he had been the subject of it. A secret instinct warned him that all the men around him were his enemies—though he knew not why—and that they were plotting against him. He also perceived that his slightest movements were watched and commented upon. However he was a brave man; his conscience did not reproach him in the least, and he was one of those persons who rather than wait for danger, provoke it.

So, with an almost defiant air, he seated himself beside a young lady dressed in pink *tulle*, and began to laugh and chat with her. He possessed a ready wit, and what is even better, tact; and for a quarter of an hour astonished those around him by his brilliant sallies. Champagne was flowing freely; and he drank four or five glasses in quick succession. Was he really conscious of what he was doing and saying? He subsequently declared that he was not, that he acted under the influence of a sort of hallucination similar to that produced by the inhalation of carbonic gas.

However, the guests did not linger long at the supper table. "Let us go back!" cried the old gentleman, who had insisted upon the suspension of the game; "we are wasting a deal of precious time here!"

Pascal rose with the others, and in his haste to enter the adjoining room he jostled two men who were talking together near the door. "So it is understood," said one of them.

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departed this life with all his possessions intact, having always added to his dominions without ever experiencing a loss. Historically this is no doubt incorrect, but none the ess, the expression prevails in France.—[TRANS.]

"Yes, yes, leave it to me; I will act as executioner."

This word sent all Pascal's blood bounding to his heart. "Who is to be executed?" he thought. "I am evidently to be the victim. But what does it all mean?"

Meanwhile the players at the green table had changed places, and Pascal found himself seated not on Ferdinand's right, but directly opposite him, and between two men about his own age—one of them being the person who had announced his intention of acting as executioner. All eyes were fixed upon the unfortunate advocate when it came his turn to deal. He staked two hundred louis, and lost them. There was a slight commotion round the table; and one of the players who had lost most heavily, remarked in an undertone: "Don't look so hard at the gentleman—he won't have any more luck."

As Pascal heard this ironical remark, uttered in a tone which made it as insulting as a blow, a gleam of light darted through his puzzled brain. He suspected at last, what any person less honest than himself would have long before understood. He thought of rising and demanding an apology; but he was stunned, almost overcome by the horrors of his situation. His ears tingled, and it seemed to him as if the beating of his heart were suspended.

However the game proceeded; but no one paid any attention to it. The stakes were insignificant, and loss or gain drew no exclamation from any one. The attention of the entire party was concentrated on Pascal; and he, with despair in his heart, followed the movements of the cards, which were passing from hand to hand, and fast approaching him again. When they reached him the silence became breathless, menacing, even sinister. The ladies, and the guests who were not playing, approached and leaned over the table in evident anxiety. "My God!" thought Pascal, "my God, if I can only lose!"

He was as pale as death; the perspiration trickled down from his hair upon his temples, and his hands trembled so much that he could scarcely hold the cards. "I will stake four thousand francs," he faltered.

"I take your bet," answered a voice.

Alas! the unfortunate fellow's wish was not gratified; he won. Then in the midst of the wildest confusion, he exclaimed: "Here are eight thousand francs!"

"Taken!"

But as he began to deal the cards, his neighbour sprang up, seized him roughly by the hands and cried: "This time I'm sure of it—you are a thief!"

With a bound, Pascal was on his feet. While his peril had been vague and undetermined, his energy had been paralyzed. But it was restored to him intact when his danger declared itself in all its horror. He pushed away the man who had caught his hands, with such violence that he sent him reeling under a sofa; then he stepped back and surveyed the excited throng with an air of menace and defiance. Useless! Seven or eight players sprang upon him and overpowered him, as if he had been the vilest criminal.

Meanwhile, the executioner, as he had styled himself, had risen to his feet with his cravat untied, and his clothes in wild disorder. "Yes," he said, addressing Pascal, "you are a thief! I saw you slip other cards among those which were handed to you."

"Wretch!" gasped Pascal.

"I saw you—and I am going to prove it." So saying he turned to the mistress of the house, who had dropped into an arm-chair, and imperiously asked, "How many packs have we used?"

"Five."

"Then there ought to be two hundred and sixty cards upon the table."

Thereupon he counted them slowly and with particular care, and he found no fewer than three hundred and seven. "Well, scoundrel!" he cried; "are you still bold enough to deny it?"

Pascal had no desire to deny it. He knew that words would weigh as nothing against this material, tangible, incontrovertible proof. Forty-seven cards had been fraudulently inserted among the others. Certainly not by him! But by whom? Still he, alone, had been the gainer through the deception.

"You see that the coward will not even defend himself!" exclaimed one of the women.

He did not deign to turn his head. What did the insult matter to him? He knew himself to be innocent, and yet he felt that he was sinking to the lowest depths of infamy—he beheld himself disgraced, branded, ruined. And realising that he must meet facts with facts, he besought God to grant him an idea, an inspiration, that would unmask the real culprit.

But another person came to his aid. With a boldness which no one would have expected on his part, M. de Coralth placed himself in front of Pascal, and in a voice which betokened more indignation than sorrow, he exclaimed: "This is a terrible mistake, gentlemen, Pascal Ferailleur is my friend; and his past vouches for his present. Go to the Palais de Justice, and make inquiries respecting his character there. They will tell you how utterly impossible it is that this man can be guilty of the ignoble act he is accused of."

No one made any reply. In the opinion of all his listeners, Ferdinand was simply fulfilling a duty which it would have been difficult for him to escape. The old gentleman who had decided the suspension and the resumption of the game, gave audible expression to the prevailing sentiment of the party. He was a portly man, who puffed like a porpoise when he talked, and whom his companions called the baron. "Your words do you honour—really do you honour," he said, addressing Ferdinand—"and no possible blame can attach to you. That your friend is not an honest man is no fault of yours. There is no outward sign to distinguish scoundrels."

Pascal had so far not opened his lips. After struggling for a moment in the hands of his captors, he now stood perfectly motionless, glancing furiously around him as if hoping to discover the coward who had prepared the trap into which he had fallen. For he felt certain that he was the victim of some atrocious conspiracy, though it was impossible for him to divine what motive had actuated his enemies. Suddenly those who were holding him felt him tremble. He raised his head; he fancied he could detect a ray of hope. "Shall I be allowed to speak in my own defence?" he asked.

"Speak!"

He tried to free himself; but those beside him would not relax their hold, so he desisted, and then, in a voice husky with emotion, he exclaimed: "I am innocent! I am the victim of an infamous plot. Who the author of it is I do not know. But there is some one here who must know." Angry exclamations and sneering laughs interrupted him. "Would you condemn me unheard," he resumed, raising his voice. "Listen to me.

About an hour ago, while you were at supper, Madame d'Argelès almost threw herself at my feet as she entreated me to leave this house. Her agitation astonished me. Now I understand it."

The gentleman known as the baron turned towards Madame d'Argelès: "Is what this man says true?"

She was greatly agitated, but she answered: "Yes."

"Why were you so anxious for him to go?"

"I don't know—a presentiment—it seemed to me that something was going to happen."

The least observant of the party could not fail to notice Madame d'Argelès hesitation and confusion; but even the shrewdest were deceived. They supposed that she had seen the act committed, and had tried to induce the culprit to make his escape, in order to avoid a scandal.

Pascal saw he could expect no assistance from this source. "M. de Coralth could assure you," he began.

"Oh, enough of that," interrupted a player. "I myself heard M. de Coralth do his best to persuade you not to play."

So the unfortunate fellow's last and only hope had vanished. Still he made a supreme effort, and addressing Madame d'Argelès: "Madame," he said, in a voice trembling with anguish, "I entreat you, tell what you know. Will you allow an honourable man to be ruined before your very eyes? Will you abandon an innocent man whom you could save by a single word?" But she remained silent; and Pascal staggered as if some one had dealt him a terrible blow. "It is all over!" he muttered.

No one heard him: everybody was listening to the baron, who seemed to be very much put out. "We are wasting precious time with all this," said he. "We should have made at least five rounds while this absurd scene has been going on. We must put an end to it. What are you going to do with this fellow? I am in favour of sending for a commissary of police."

Such was not at all the opinion of the majority of the guests. Four or five of the ladies took flight at the bare suggestion, and several men—the most aristocratic of the company—became angry at once. "Are you mad?" said one of them. "Do you want to see us all summoned as witnesses? You have probably forgotten that Garcia affair, and that rumpus at Jenny Fancy's house. A fine thing it would be to see, no one knows how many great names mixed up with those of sharpers and notorious women!"

Naturally of a florid complexion, the baron's face now became scarlet. "So it's fear of scandal that deters you! Zounds, sir! a man's courage should equal his vices. Look at me."

Celebrated for his income of eight hundred thousand francs a year, for his estates in Burgundy, for his passion for gaming, his horses, and his cook, the baron wielded a mighty influence. Still, on this occasion he did not carry the day, for it was decided that the "sharper" should be allowed to depart unmolested. "Make him at least return the money," growled a loser; "compel him to disgorge."

"His winnings are there upon the table."

"Don't believe it," cried the baron. "All these scoundrels have secret pockets in which they stow away their plunder. Search him by all means."

"That's it—search him!"

Crushed by this unexpected, undeserved and incomprehensible misfortune, Pascal had almost yielded to his fate. But the shameful cry: "Search him!" kindled terrible wrath in his brain. He shook off his assailants as a

lion shakes off the hounds that have attacked him, and, reaching the fireplace with a single bound, he snatched up a heavy bronze candelabrum and brandished it in the air, crying: "The first who approaches is a dead man!"

He was ready to strike, there was no doubt about it; and such a weapon, in the hands of a determined man, becomes positively terrible. The danger seemed so great and so certain that his enemies paused—each encouraging his neighbour with his glance; but no one was inclined to engage in this struggle, by which the victor would merely gain a few bank-notes. "Stand back, and allow me to retire?" said Pascal, imperiously. They still hesitated; but finally made way. And, formidable in his indignation and audacity he reached the door of the room unmolested, and disappeared.

This superb outburst of outraged honour, this marvellous energy—succeeding, as it did, the most complete mental prostration—and these terrible threats, had proved so prompt and awe-inspiring that no one had thought of cutting off Pascal's retreat. The guests had not recovered from their stupor, but were still standing silent and intimidated when they heard the outer door close after him.

It was a woman who at last broke the spell. "Ah, well!" she exclaimed, in a tone of intense admiration, "that handsome fellow is level-headed!"

"He naturally desired to save his plunder!"

It was the same expression that M. de Coralth had employed; and which had, perhaps, prevented Pascal from yielding to Madame d'Argelès' entreaties. Everybody applauded the sentiment — everybody, the baron excepted. This rich man, whose passions had dragged him into the vilest dens of Europe, was thoroughly acquainted with sharpers and scoundrels of every type, from those who ride in their carriages down to the bare-footed vagabond. He knew the thief who grovels at his victim's feet, humbly confessing his crime, the desperate knave who swallows the notes he has stolen, the abject wretch who bares his back to receive the blows he deserves, and the rascal who boldly confronts his accusers and protests his innocence with the indignation of an honest man. But never, in any of these scoundrels, had the baron seen the proud steadfast glance with which this man had awed his accusers.

With this thought uppermost in his mind he drew the person who had seized Pascal's hands at the card-table a little aside. "Tell me," said he, "did you actually see that young man slip the cards into the pack?"

"No, not exactly. But you know what we agreed at supper? We were sure that he was cheating; and it was necessary to find some pretext for counting the cards."

"What if he shouldn't be guilty, after all?"

"Who else could be guilty then? He was the only winner."

To this terrible argument—the same which had silenced Pascal—the baron made no reply. Indeed his intervention became necessary elsewhere, for the other guests were beginning to talk loudly and excitedly around the pile of gold and banknotes which Pascal had left on the table. They had counted it, and found it to amount to the sum of thirty-six thousand three hundred and twenty francs; and it was the question of dividing it properly among the losers which was causing all this uproar. Among these guests, who belonged to the highest society—among these judges who had so summarily convicted an innocent man, and suggested the searching of a supposed sharper only a moment before—there were several who unblushingly misrepresented their losses. This was undeniable; for on adding the various amounts that were claimed together a grand total of ninety-one

thousand francs was reached. Had this man who had just fled taken the difference between the two sums away with him? A difference amounting almost to fifty-five thousand francs? No, this was impossible; the supposition could not be entertained for a moment. However, the discussion might have taken an unfortunate turn, had it not been for the baron. In all matters relating to cards, his word was law. He quietly said, "It is all right;" and they submitted.

Nevertheless, he absolutely refused to take his share of the money; and after the division, rubbing his hands as if he were delighted to see this disagreeable affair concluded, he exclaimed: "It is only six o'clock: we have still time for a few rounds."

But the other guests, pale, disturbed, and secretly ashamed of themselves, were eager to depart, and in fact they were already hastening to the cloak-room. "At least play a game of écarté," cried the baron, "a simple game of écarté, at twenty louis a point."

But no one listened, and he reluctantly prepared to follow his departing friends, who bowed to Madame d'Argelès on the landing, as they filed by. M. de Coralth, who was among the last to retire, had already reached the staircase, and descended two or three steps, when Madame d'Argelès called to him. "Remain," said she; "I want to speak with you."

"You will excuse me," he began; "I—"

But she again bade him "remain" in such an imperious tone that he dared not resist. He reascended the stairs, very much after the manner of a man who is being dragged into a dentist's office, and followed Madame d'Argelès into a small boudoir at the end of the gambling room. As soon as the door was closed and locked, the mistress of the house turned to her prisoner. "Now you will explain," said she. "It was you who brought M. Pascal Ferailleur here."

"Alas! I know only too well that I ought to beg your forgiveness. However, this affair will cost me dear myself. It has already embroiled me in a difficulty with that fool of a Rochecote, with whom I shall have to fight in less than a couple of hours."

"Where did you make his acquaintance?"

"Whose—Rochecote's?"

Madame d'Argelès' sempiternal smile had altogether disappeared. "I am speaking seriously," said she, with a threatening ring in her voice. "How did you happen to become acquainted with M. Ferailleur?"

"That can be very easily explained. Seven or eight months ago I had need of an advocate's services, and he was recommended to me. He managed my case very cleverly, and we kept up the acquaintance."

"What is his position?"

M. de Coralth's features wore an expression of exceeding weariness as if he greatly longed to go to sleep. He had indeed installed himself in a large arm-chair, in a semi-recumbent position. "Upon my word, I don't know," he replied, "Pascal had always seemed to be the most irreproachable man in the world—a man you might call a philosopher! He lives in a retired part of the city, near the Panthèon, with his mother, who is a widow, a very respectable woman, always dressed in black. When she opened the door for me, on the occasion of my first visit, I thought some old family portrait had stepped down from its frame to receive me. I judge them to be in comfortable circumstances. Pascal has the reputation of being a remarkable man, and people supposed he would rise very high in his profession."

"But now he is ruined; his career is finished."

"Certainly! You can be quite sure that by this evening all Paris will know what occurred here last night."

He paused, meeting Madame Argelès' look of withering scorn with a cleverly assumed air of astonishment. "You are a villain! Monsieur de Coralth," she said, indignantly.

"I—and why?"

"Because it was you who slipped those cards, which made M. Ferailleur win, into the pack; I saw you do it! And yielding to my entreaties, the young fellow was about to leave the house when you, intentionally, prevented him from saving himself. Oh! don't deny it."

M. de Coralth rose in the coolest possible manner. "I deny nothing, my dear lady," he replied, "absolutely nothing. You and I understand each other."

Confounded by his unblushing impudence, Madame d'Argelès remained speechless for a moment. "You confess it!" she cried, at last. "You dare to confess it! Were you not afraid that I might speak and state what I had seen?"

He shrugged his shoulders. "No one would have believed you," he exclaimed.

"Yes, I should have been believed, Monsieur de Coralth, for I could have given proofs. You must have forgotten that I know you, that your past life is no secret to me, that I know who you are, and what dishonoured name you hide beneath your borrowed title! I could have told my guests that you are married—that you have abandoned your wife and child, leaving them to perish in want and misery—I could have told them where you obtain the thirty or forty thousand francs you spend each year. You must have forgotten that Rose told me everything, Monsieur—Paul!" *

She had struck the right place this time, and with such precision that M. de Coralth turned livid, and made a furious gesture, as if he were about to fell her to the ground. "Ah, take care!" he exclaimed: "take care!"

But his rage speedily subsided, and with his usual indifferent manner, and in a bantering tone, he said: "Well, what of that? Do you fancy that the world doesn't already suspect what you could reveal? People have suspected me of being even worse than I am. When you proclaim on the housetops that I am an adventurer, folks will only laugh at you, and I shall be none the worse for it. A matter that would crush a dozen men like Pascal Ferailleur would not injure me in the least. I am accustomed to it. I must have luxury and enjoyment, everything that is pleasant and beautiful—and to procure all this, I do my very best. It is true that I don't derive my income from my estate in Brie; but I have plenty of money, and that is the essential thing. Besides, it is so difficult to earn a livelihood now-a-days, and the love of luxury is so intense that no one knows at night what he may do—or, rather, what he won't do—the next day. And last, but not least, the people who ought to be despised are so numerous that contempt is an impossibility. A Parisian who happened to be so absurdly pretentious as to refuse to shake hands with such of his acquaintances as were not irreproachable characters, might walk for hours on the Boulevards without finding an occasion to take his hands out of his pockets."

M. de Coralth talked well enough, and yet, in point of fact, all this was sheer bravado on his part. He knew better than anyone else, on what a frail and uncertain basis his brilliant existence was established. Certainly, society does show great indulgence to people of doubtful reputation. It

* See Gaboriau's "Slaves of Paris."

shuts its eyes and refuses to look or listen. But this is all the more reason why it should be pitiless when a person's guilt is positively established. Thus, although he assumed an air of insolent security, the "viscount" anxiously watched the effect of his words upon Madame d'Argelès. Fortunately for himself, he saw that she was abashed by his cynicism; and so he resumed: "Besides, as our friend, the baron, would say, we are wasting precious time in discussing improbable, and even impossible, suppositions. I was sufficiently well acquainted with your heart and your intelligence, my dear madame, to be sure that you would not speak a word to my disparagement."

"Indeed! What prevented me from doing so?"

"*I* did; or perhaps I ought rather to say, your own good sense, which closed your mouth when Monsieur Pascal entreated you to speak in his defence. I am entitled to considerable indulgence, madame, and a great deal ought to be forgiven me. *My* mother, unfortunately, was an honest woman, who did not furnish me with the means of gratifying every whim."

Madame d'Argelès recoiled as if a serpent had suddenly crossed her path.

"What do you mean?" she faltered.

"You know as well as I do."

"I don't understand you—explain yourself."

With the impatient gesture of a man who finds himself compelled to answer an idle question, and assuming an air of hypocritical commiseration, he replied: "Well, since you insist upon it, I know, in Paris—in the Rue de Helder, to be more exact—a nice young fellow, whose lot I have often envied. He has wanted for nothing since the day he came into the world. At school, he had three times as much money as his richest playfellow. When his studies were finished, a tutor was provided—with his pockets full of gold—to conduct this favoured youth to Italy, Egypt, and Greece. He is now studying law; and four times a year, with unvarying punctuality, he receives a letter from London containing five thousand francs. This is all the more remarkable, as this young man has neither a father nor a mother. He is alone in the world with his income of twenty thousand francs. I have heard him say, jestingly, that some good fairy must be watching over him; but I know that he believes himself to be the illegitimate son of some great English nobleman. Sometimes, when he has drunk a little too much, he talks of going in search of my lord, his father."

The effect M. de Coralth had created by these words must have been extremely gratifying to him, for Madame d'Argelès had fallen back in her chair, almost fainting. "So, my dear madame," he continued, "if I ever had any reason to fancy that you intended causing me any trouble, I should go to this charming youth and say: 'My good fellow, you are strangely deceived. Your money doesn't come from the treasure-box of an English peer, but from a small gambling den with which I am very well acquainted, having often had occasion to swell its revenues with my franc-pieces.' And if he mourned his vanished dreams, I should tell him: 'You are wrong; for, if the great nobleman is lost, the good fairy remains. She is none other than your mother, a very worthy person, whose only object in life is your comfort and advancement.' And if he doubted my word, I should bring him to his mother's house some *baccarat* night; and there would be a scene of recognition worthy of Fargueil's genius."

Any man but M. de Coralth would have had some compassion, for Madame d'Argelès was evidently suffering agony. "It is as I feared!" she moaned, in a scarcely audible voice.

However, he heard her. "What!" he exclaimed in a tone of intense astonishment; "did you really doubt it? No; I can't believe it; it would be doing injustice to your intelligence and experience. Are people like ourselves obliged to talk in order to understand each other? Should I ever have ventured to do what I have done, in your house, if I had not known the secret of your maternal tenderness, delicacy of feeling, and devotion?"

She was weeping; big tears were rolling down her face, tracing a broad furrow through the powder on her cheeks. "He knows everything!" she murmured; "he knows everything!"

"By the merest chance, I assure you. As I don't like folks to meddle with my affairs, I never meddle with theirs. As I have just said, it was entirely the work of chance. One April afternoon I came to invite you to a drive in the Bois. I was ushered into this very room where we are sitting now, and found you writing. I said I would wait until you finished your letter; but some one called you, and you hastily left the room. How it was that I happened to approach your writing-table I cannot explain; but I did approach it, and read your unfinished letter. Upon my word it touched me deeply. I can give no better proof of the truth of my assertion than the fact that I can repeat it, almost word for word, even now. 'DEAR SIR,'—you wrote to your London correspondent—'I send you three thousand francs, in addition to the five thousand for the regular quarterly payment. Forward the money without delay. I fear the poor boy is greatly annoyed by his creditors. Yesterday I had the happiness of seeing him in the Rue de Helder, and I found him looking pale and care-worn. When you send him this money, forward at the same time a letter of fatherly advice. It is true, he ought to work and win an honourable position for himself; but think of the dangers and temptation that beset him, alone and friendless, in this corrupt city.' There, my dear lady, your letter ended; but the name and address were given, and it was easy enough to understand it. You remember, perhaps, a little incident that occurred after your return. On perceiving that you had forgotten your letter, you turned pale and glanced at me. 'Have you read it, and do you understand it?' your eyes asked; while mine replied: 'Yes, but I shall be silent.'"

"And I shall be silent too," said Madame d'Argelès.

M. de Coralth took her hand and raised it to his lips. "I knew we should understand each other," he remarked, gravely. "I am not bad at heart, believe me; and if I had possessed money of my own, or a mother like you—"

She averted her face, fearing perhaps that M. de Coralth might read her opinion of him in her eyes; but after a short pause she exclaimed beseechingly: "Now that I am your accomplice, let me entreat you to do all you possibly can to prevent last night's affair from being noised abroad."

"Impossible."

"If not for M. Ferailleur's sake, for the sake of his poor widowed mother."

"Pascal must be put out of the way!"

"Why do you say that? Do you hate him so much then? What has he done to you?"

"To me, personally? Nothing—I even feel actual sympathy for him."

Madame d'Argelès was confounded. "What!" she stammered; "it wasn't on your own account that you did this?"

"Why, no."

She sprang to her feet, and quivering with scorn and indignation, cried: "Ah! then the deed is even more infamous—even more cowardly!" But alarmed by the threatening gleam in M. de Coralth's eyes, she went no further.

"A truce to these disagreeable truths," said he, coldly. "If we expressed our opinions of each other without reserve, in this world, we should soon come to hard words. Do you think I acted for my own pleasure? Suppose some one had seen me when I slipped the cards into the pack. If that had happened, *I* should have been ruined."

"And you think that no one suspects you?"

"No one. I lost more than a hundred louis myself. If Pascal belonged to our set, people might investigate the matter, perhaps; but to-morrow it will be forgotten."

"And will he have no suspicions?"

"He will have no proofs to offer, in any case."

Madame d'Argelès seemed to resign herself to the inevitable. "I hope you will, at least, tell me on whose behalf you acted," she remarked.

"Impossible," replied M. de Coralth. And, consulting his watch, he added, "But I am forgetting myself; I am forgetting that that idiot of a Rochecote is waiting for a sword thrust. So go to sleep, my dear lady, and—till we meet again."

She accompanied him so far as the landing. "It is quite certain that he is hastening to the house of M. Ferailleur's enemy," she thought. And, calling her confidential servant, "Quick, Job," she said; "follow M. de Coralth. I want to know where he is going. And, above all, take care that he doesn't see you."

V.

If through the length and breadth of Paris there is a really quiet, peaceful street, a refuge for the thoughtfully inclined, it is surely the broad Rue d'Ulm, which starts from the Place du Panthéon, and finishes abruptly at the Rue des Feuillantines. The shops are unassuming, and so few that one can easily count them. There is a wine-shop on the left-hand side, at the corner of the Rue de la Vieille-Estrapade; then a little toy-shop, then a washerwoman's and then a book-binder's establishment; while on the right hand you will find the office of the *Bulletin*, with a locksmith's, a fruiterer's, and a baker's—that is all. Along the rest of the street run several spacious buildings, somewhat austere in appearance, though some of them are surrounded by large gardens. Here stands the Convent of the Sisters of the Cross, with the House of Our Lady of Adoration; while further on, near the Rue des Feuillantinés, you find the Normal School, with the office of the General Omnibus Company hard by. At day time you mostly meet grave and thoughtful faces in the street: priests, *savants*, professors, and clerks employed in the adjacent public libraries. The only stir is round about the omnibus office; and if occasional bursts of laughter are heard they are sure to come from the Normal School. After nightfall, a person might suppose himself to be at least a hundred leagues from the Boulevard Montmartre and the Opera-House, in some quiet old provincial town, at Poitiers, for instance. And it is only on listening attentively that you can catch even a faint echo of the tumult of Paris.

It was in this street—"out of the world," as M. de Coralth expressed it—that Pascal Ferailleur resided with his mother. They occupied a second

floor, a pretty suite of five rooms, looking out upon a garden. Their rent was high. Indeed, they paid fourteen hundred francs a year. But this was a burden which Pascal's profession imposed upon him ; for he, of course, required a private office and a little waiting-room for his clients. With this exception, the mother and son led a straightened, simple life. Their only servant was a woman who came at seven o'clock to do the heavy work, went home again at twelve, and did not return again until the evening, to serve dinner. Madame Ferailleur attended to everything, not blushing in the least when she was compelled to open the door for some client. Besides, she could do this without the least risk of encountering disrespect, so imposing and dignified were her manners and her person.

M. de Coralth had shown excellent judgment when he compared her to a family portrait. She was, in fact, exactly the person a painter would select to represent some old burgher's wife—a chaste and loving spouse, a devoted mother, an incomparable housewife—in one phrase, the faithful guardian of her husband's domestic happiness. She had just passed her fiftieth birthday, and looked fully her age. She had suffered. A close observer would have detected traces of weeping about her wrinkled eyelids; and the twinge of her lips was expressive of cruel anguish, heroically endured. Still, she was not severe, nor even too sedate ; and the few friends who visited her were often really astonished at her wit. Besides, she was one of those women who have no history, and who find happiness in what others would call duty. Her life could be summed up in a single sentence : she had loved ; she had mourned.

The daughter of a petty clerk in one of the government departments, and merely dowered with a modest portion of three thousand francs, she had married a young man as poor as herself, but intelligent and industrious, whom she loved, and who adored her. This young man on marrying had sworn that he would make a fortune ; not that he cared for money for himself, but he wished to provide his idol with every luxury. His love, enhancing his energy, no doubt hastened his success. Attached as a chemist to a large manufacturing establishment, his services soon became so invaluable to his employers that they gave him a considerable interest in the business. His name even obtained an honourable place among modern inventors ; and we are indebted to him for the discovery of one of those brilliant colours that are extracted from common coal. At the end of ten years he had become a man of means. He loved his wife as fondly as on the day of their marriage, and he had a son—Pascal.

Unfortunate fellow ! One day, in the full sunshine of happiness and success, while he was engaged in a series of experiments for the purpose of obtaining a durable, and at the same time perfectly harmless, green, the chemicals exploded, smashing the mortar which he held, and wounding him horribly about the head and chest. A fortnight later he died, apparently calm, but in reality a prey to bitter regrets. It was a terrible blow for his poor wife, and the thought of her son alone reconciled her to life. Pascal was now everything to her—her present and her future ; and she solemnly vowed that she would make a noble man of him. But, alas ! misfortunes never come singly. One of her husband's friends, who acted as administrator to the estate, took a contemptible advantage of her inexperience. She went to sleep one night possessing an income of fifteen thousand francs, but she awoke to find herself ruined—so completely ruined that she did not know where to obtain her dinner for that same evening. Had she been alone in the world, she would not have grieved much over the catastrophe,

but she was sadly affected by the thought that her son's future was, perhaps, irrevocably blighted, and that, in any case, this disaster would condemn him to enter life through the cramped and gloomy portals of poverty.

However, Madame Ferailleur was of too courageous and too proud a nature not to meet this danger with virile energy. She wasted no time in useless lamentations. She determined to repair the harm as far as it was in her power to repair it, resolving that her son's studies at the college of Louis-the-Great should not be interrupted, even if she had to labour with her own hands. And when she spoke of manual toil, it was no wild, unmeaning exaggeration born of sorrow and a passing flash of courage. She found employment as a day-servant and in sewing for large shops, until she at last obtained a situation as clerk in the establishment where her husband had been a partner. To obtain this she was obliged to acquire a knowledge of book-keeping, but she was amply repaid for her trouble; for the situation was worth eighteen hundred francs a year, besides food and lodging. Then only did her efforts momentarily abate; she felt that her arduous task was drawing to a happy close. Pascal's expenses at school amounted to about nine hundred francs a year; she did not spend more than one hundred on herself; and thus she was able to save nearly eight hundred francs a year.

It must be admitted that she was admirably seconded in her efforts by her son. Pascal was only twelve years old when his mother said to him: "I have ruined you, my son. Nothing remains of the fortune which your father accumulated by dint of toil and self-sacrifice. You will be obliged to rely upon yourself, my boy. God grant that in years to come you will not reproach me for my imprudence."

The child did not throw himself into her arms, but holding his head proudly erect, he answered: "I shall love you even more, dear mother, if that be possible. As for the fortune which my father left you, I will restore it to you again. I am no longer a school-boy, I am a man—as you shall see."

One could not fail to perceive that he had taken a solemn vow. Although he possessed a remarkable mind, and the power of acquiring knowledge rapidly, he had, so far, worked indifferently, and then only by fits and starts, whenever examination time drew near. But from that day forward he did not lose a moment. His remarks, which were at once comical and touching, were those of the head of a family, deeply impressed by a sense of his own responsibility. "You see," he said to his companions, who were astonished at his sudden thirst for knowledge, "I can't afford to wear out my breeches on the college forms, now that my poor mother has to pay for them with her work."

His good-humour was not in the least impaired by his resolve not to spend a single penny of his pocket money. With a tact unusual at his age, or indeed at any other, he bore his misfortunes simply and proudly, without any of the servile humility or sullen envy which so often accompanies poverty. For three years in succession the highest prizes at the competitions rewarded him for his efforts; but these successes, far from elating him unduly, seemed to afford him but little satisfaction. "This is only glory," he thought; and his great ambition was to support himself.

He was soon able to do so, thanks to the kindness of the head-master, who offered him his tuition gratis if he would assist in superintending some of the lower classes. Thus one day when Madame Ferailleur presented herself as usual to make her quarterly payment, the steward replied: "You owe us nothing, madame; everything has been paid by your son."

She almost fainted; after bearing adversity so bravely, this happiness proved too much for her. She could scarcely believe it. A long explanation was necessary to convince her of the truth, and then big tears, tears of joy this time, gushed from her eyes.

In this way, Pascal Ferailleur paid all the expenses of his education until he had won his degree, arming himself so as to resist the trials that awaited him, and giving abundant proof of energy and ability. He wished to be a lawyer; and the law, he was forced to admit, is a profession which is almost beyond the reach of penniless young men. But there are no insurmountable obstacles for those whose hearts are really set on an object. On the very day that Pascal inscribed his name as a student at the law school, he entered an advocate's office as a clerk. His duties, which were extremely tiresome at first, had the two-fold advantage of familiarising him with the forms of legal procedure, and of furnishing him with the means of prosecuting his studies. After he had been in the office six months, his employer agreed to pay him eight hundred francs a year, which were increased to fifteen hundred at the end of the second twelvemonth. In three years, when he had passed his final examination qualifying him to practice, his patron raised him to the position of head-clerk, with a salary of three thousand francs, which Pascal was moreover able to increase considerably by drawing up documents for busy attorneys, and assisting them in the preparation of their least important cases.

It was certainly something wonderful to have achieved such a result in so short a time; but the most difficult part of his task had still to be accomplished. It was a perilous undertaking to abandon an assured position, to cast a certainty aside for the chances of life at the bar. It was a grave step—so grave, indeed, that Pascal hesitated for a long time. He was threatened with the danger that always threatens subordinates who are useful to their superiors. He felt that his employer, who was in the habit of relieving himself of his heaviest duties by intrusting them to him, would not be likely to forgive him for leaving. And on starting on his own account, he could ill afford to dispense with this lawyer's good will. The patronage that could scarcely fail to follow him from an office where he had served for four years was the most substantial basis of his calculations for the future. Eventually he succeeded to his satisfaction, though not without some difficulty, and only by employing that supreme *finesse* which consists in absolute frankness.

Before his office had been open a fortnight, he had seven or eight briefs waiting their turn upon his desk, and his first efforts were such as win the approving smile of old judges, and draw from them the prediction: "That young man will rise in his profession." He had not desired to make any display of his knowledge or talent, but merely to win the cases confided to him; and, unlike many beginners, he evinced no inclination to shine at his clients' expense. Rare modesty, and it served him well. His first ten months of practice brought him about eight thousand francs, absorbed in part by the expense attaching to a suitable office. The second year his fees increased by about one half, and, feeling that his position was now assured, he insisted that his mother should resign her clerkship. He proved to her what was indeed the truth—that by superintending his establishment, she would save more than she made in her present position.

From that time the mother and the son had good reason to believe that their heroic energy had conquered fate. Clients became so numerous that Pascal found it necessary to draw nearer the business centre, and his rent

was consequently doubled; but the income he derived from his profession increased so rapidly that he soon had twelve thousand francs safely invested as a resource against any emergency. Madame Ferailleur now laid aside the mourning she had worn since her husband's death. She felt that she owed it to Pascal; and, besides, after believing there was no more happiness left for her on earth, her heart rejoiced at her son's success.

Pascal was thus on the highroad to fame, when a complication in M. Ferdinand de Coralth's affairs brought that young nobleman to his office. The trouble arose from a little stock exchange operation which M. Ferdinand had engaged in—an affair which savoured a trifle of knavery. It was strange, but Pascal rather took a liking to M. de Coralth. The honest worker felt interested in this dashing adventurer; he was almost dazzled by his brilliant vices, his wit, his hardihood, conceit, marvellous assurance, and careless impudence; and he studied this specimen of the Parisian flora with no little curiosity. M. de Coralth certainly did not confide the secret of his life and his resources to Pascal; but the latter's intelligence should have told him to distrust a man who treated the requirements of morality even more than cavalierly, and who had infinitely more wants than scruples. However, the young advocate seemed to have no suspicions; they exchanged visits occasionally, and it was Pascal himself who one day requested the viscount to take him to one of those "Reunions in High Life" which the newspapers describe in such glowing terms.

Madame Ferailleur was playing a game of whist with a party of old friends, according to her custom every Thursday evening, when M. de Coralth called to invite the young advocate to accompany him to Madame d'Argelès' reception. Pascal considered his friend's invitation exceedingly well timed. He dressed himself with more than ordinary care, and, as usual before going out, he approached his mother to kiss her and wish her good-bye. "How fine you are!" she said, smiling.

"I am going to a soirée, my dear mother," he replied; "and it is probable that I shall not return until very late. So don't wait for me, I beg of you; promise me to go to bed at your usual hour."

"Have you the night-key?"

"Yes."

"Very well, then; I will not wait for you. When you come in you will find your candle and some matches on the buffet in the ante-room. And wrap yourself up well, for it is very cold." Then raising her forehead to her son's lips, she gaily added: "A pleasant evening to you, my boy!"

Faithful to her promise, Madame Ferailleur retired at the usual hour; but she could not sleep. She certainly had no cause for anxiety, and yet the thought that her son was not at home filled her heart with vague misgivings such as she had never previously felt under similar circumstances. Possibly it was because she did not know where Pascal was going. Possibly M. de Coralth was the cause of her strange disquietude, for she utterly disliked the viscount. Her woman's instinct warned her that there was something unwholesome about this young man's peculiar handsomeness, and that it was not safe to trust to his professions of friendship. At all events, she lay awake and heard the clock of the neighbouring Normal School strike each successive hour—two, three, and four. "How late Pascal stays," she said, to herself.

And suddenly a fear more poignant even than her presentiments darted through her mind. She sprang out of bed and rushed to the window. She fancied she had heard a terrible cry of distress in the deserted street. At

that very moment, the insulting word "thief" was being hurled in her son's face. But the street was silent, and deciding that she had been mistaken, she went back to bed laughing at herself for her fears; and at last she fell asleep. But judge of her terror in the morning when, on rising to let the servant in, she saw Pascal's candle still standing on the buffet. Was it possible that he had not returned? She hastened to his room—he was not there. And it was nearly eight o'clock.

This was the first time that Pascal had spent a night from home without warning his mother in advance; and such an act on the part of a man of his character was sufficient proof that something extraordinary had occurred. In an instant all the dangers that lurk in Paris after nightfall flashed through her mind. She remembered all the stories she had read of men decoyed into dark corners, of men stabbed at the turn of some deserted street, or thrown into the Seine while crossing one of the bridges. What should she do? Her first impulse was to run to the Commissary of Police's office or to the house of Pascal's friend; but on the other hand, she dared not go out, for fear he might return in her absence. Thus, in an agony of suspense, she waited—counting the seconds by the quick throbbings of her temples, and straining her ears to catch the slightest sound.

At last, about half-past eight o'clock, she heard a heavy, uncertain footfall on the stairs. She flew to the door and beheld her son. His clothes were torn and disordered; his cravat was missing, he wore no overcoat, and he was bare-headed. He looked very pale, and his teeth were chattering. His eyes stared vacantly, and his features had an almost idiotic expression. "Pascal, what has happened to you?" she asked.

He trembled from head to foot as the sound of her voice suddenly roused him from his stupor. "Nothing," he stammered; "nothing at all." And as his mother pressed him with questions, he pushed her gently aside and went on to his room.

"Poor child!" murmured Madame Ferailleur, at once grieved and reassured; "and he is always so temperate. Some one must have forced him to drink."

She was entirely wrong in her surmise, and yet Pascal's sensations were exactly like those of an intoxicated man. How he had returned home, by what road, and what had happened on the way, he could not tell. He had found his way back mechanically, merely by force of habit—physical memory, as it might be called. He had a vague impression, however, that he had sat down for some time on a bench in the Champs-Elysées, that he had felt extremely cold, and that he had been accosted by a policeman, who threatened him with arrest if he did not move on. The last thing he could clearly recollect was rushing from Madame d'Argelès' house in the Rue de Berry. He knew that he had descended the staircase slowly and deliberately; that the servants in the vestibule had stood aside to allow him to pass; and that, while crossing the courtyard, he had thrown away the candelabrum with which he had defended himself. After that, he remembered nothing distinctly. On reaching the street he had been overcome by the fresh air, just as a carouser is overcome on emerging from a heated dining-room. Perhaps the champagne which he had drank had contributed to this cerebral disorder. At all events, even now, in his own room, seated in his own arm-chair, and surrounded by familiar objects, he did not succeed in regaining the possession of his faculties.

He had barely strength enough to throw himself on to the bed, and in a moment he was sleeping with that heavy slumber which so often seizes

hold of one on the occasion of a great crisis, and which has so frequently been observed among persons condemned to death, on the night preceding their execution. Four or five times his mother came to listen at the door. Once she entered, and seeing her son sleeping soundly, she could not repress a smile of satisfaction. "Poor Pascal?" she thought, "he can bear no excess but excess of work. Heavens! how surprised and mortified he will be when he awakes!"

Alas! it was not a trifling mortification, but despair, which awaited the sleeper on his wakening; for the past, the present, and the future were presented simultaneously and vision-like to his imagination. Although he had scarcely regained the full use of his faculties, he was, to some extent, at least capable of reflection and deliberation, and he tried to look the situation bravely in the face. First, as to the past, he had not the shadow of a doubt. He realised that he had fallen into a vile trap, and the person who had laid it for him was undoubtedly M. de Coralth, who, seated at his right, had prepared the "hands" with which he had won. This was evident. It seemed equally proven that Madame d'Argelès knew the real culprit—possibly she had detected him in the act, possibly he had taken her into his confidence. But what he could not fathom was M. de Coralth's motive. What could have prompted the viscount to commit such an atrocious act? The incentive must have been very powerful, since he had naturally incurred the danger of detection and of being considered an accomplice at the least. And then what influence had closed Madame d'Argelè's lips? But after all, what was the use of these conjectures? It was an actual, unanswerable, and terrible fact that this infamous plot had been successful, and that Pascal was dishonoured. He was honesty itself, and yet he was accused—more than that, *convicted*—of cheating at cards! He was innocent, and yet he could furnish no proofs of his innocence. He knew the real culprit, and yet he could see no way of unmasking him or even of accusing him. Do what he would, this atrocious, incomprehensive calumny would crush him. The bar was closed against him; his career was ended. And the terrible conviction that there was no escape from the abyss into which he had fallen made his reason totter—he felt that he was incapable of deciding on the best course, and that he must have a friend's advice.

Full of this idea, he hastily changed his clothes, and hurried from his room. His mother was watching for him—inclined to laugh at him a little; but a single glance warned her that her son was in terrible trouble, and that some dire misfortune had certainly befallen them. "Pascal, in heaven's name, what has happened?" she cried.

"A slight difficulty—a mere trifle," he replied.

"Where are you going?"

"To the Palais de Justice." And such was really the case, for he hoped to meet his most intimate friend there.

Contrary to his usual custom, he took the little staircase on the right, leading to the grand vestibule, where several lawyers were assembled, earnestly engaged in conversation. They were evidently astonished to see Pascal, and their conversation abruptly ceased on his approach. They assumed a grave look and turned away their heads in disgust. The unfortunate man at once realised the truth, and pressed his hand to his forehead, with a despairing gesture, as he murmured: "Already!—already!"

However, he passed on, and not seeing his friend, he hurried to the little conference hall, where he found five of his fellow-advocates. On Pascal's

entrance, two of them at once left the hall, while two of the others pretended to be very busily engaged in examining a brief which lay open on the table. The fifth, who did not move, was not the friend Pascal sought, but an old college comrade named Dartelle. Pascal walked straight towards him. "Well?" he asked.

Dartelle handed him a *Figaro*, still damp from the printing-press, but crumpled and worn, as if it had already passed through more than a hundred hands. "Read!" said he.

Pascal read as follows: "There was great sensation and a terrible scandal last night at the residence of Madame d'A—, a well-known star of the first magnitude. A score of gentlemen of high rank and immense wealth were enjoying a quiet game of baccarat, when it was observed that M. F— was winning in a most extraordinary manner. He was watched and detected in the very act of dexterously slipping some cards into the pack he held. Crushed by the overpowering evidence against him, he allowed himself to be searched, and without much demur consented to refund the fruit of his knavery, to the amount of two thousand louis. The strangest thing connected with this scandal is, that M. F—, who is an advocate by profession, has always enjoyed an enviable reputation for integrity; and, unfortunately, this prank cannot be attributed to a momentary fit of madness, for the fact that he had provided himself with these cards in advance proves the act to have been premeditated. One of the persons present was especially displeased. This was the Viscount de C—, who had introduced M. F— to Madame d'A—. Extremely annoyed by this *contretemps*, he took umbrage at an offensive remark made by M. de R—, and it was rumoured that these gentlemen would cross swords at daybreak this morning.

"LATER INTELLIGENCE.—We learn at the moment of going to press that an encounter has just taken place between M. de R— and M. de C—. M. de R— received a slight wound in the side, but his condition is sufficiently satisfactory not to alarm his friends."

The paper slipped from Pascal's hand. His features were almost unrecognizable in his passion and despair. "It is an infamous lie!" he said, hoarsely. "I am innocent; I swear it upon my honour!" Dartelle averted his face, but not quickly enough to prevent Pascal from noticing the look of withering scorn in his eyes. Then, feeling that he was condemned, that his sentence was irrevocable, and that there was no longer any hope: "I know the only thing that remains for me to do!" he murmured.

Dartelle turned, his eyes glistening with tears. He seized Pascal's hands and pressed them with sorrowful tenderness, as if taking leave of a friend who is about to die. "Courage!" he whispered.

Pascal fled like a madman. "Yes," he repeated, as he rushed along the Boulevard Saint-Michel, that is the only thing left me to do."

When he reached home he entered his office, double-locked the door, and wrote two letters—one to his mother, the other to the president of the order of Advocates. After a moment's thought he began a third, but tore it into pieces before he had completed it. Then, without an instant's hesitation, and like a man who had fully decided upon his course, he took a revolver and a box of cartridges from a drawer in his desk. "Poor mother!" he murmured, "it will kill her—but my disgrace would kill her too. Better shorten the agony."

He little fancied at that supreme moment that each of his gestures, each contraction of his features, were viewed by the mother whose name he faltered. Since her son had left her to go to the Palais de Justice, the poor woman had remained almost crazy with anxiety; and when she heard him return and lock himself in his office—a thing he had never done before—a fearful presentiment was aroused in her mind. Gliding into her son's bedroom, she at once approached the door communicating with his office. The upper part of this portal was of glass; it was possible to see what was occurring in the adjoining room. When Madame Ferailleur perceived Pascal seat himself at his desk and begin to write, she felt a trifle reassured, and almost thought of going away. But a vague dread, stronger than reason or will, riveted her to the spot. A few moments later, when she saw the revolver in her son's hand, she understood everything. Her blood froze in her veins; and yet she had sufficient self-control to repress the cry of terror which sprang to her lips. She realised that the danger was terrible, imminent, extreme. Her heart, rather than her bewildered reason, told her that her son's life hung on a single thread. The slightest sound, a word, a rap on the door might hasten the unfortunate man's deed.

An inspiration from heaven came to the poor mother. Pascal had contented himself with locking the door leading to the ante-room. He had forgotten this one, or neglected it, not thinking that anybody would approach his office through his bedroom. But his mother perceived that this door opened towards her. So, turning the knob with the utmost caution, she flung it suddenly open, and reaching her son's side with a single bound, she clasped him closely in her arms. "Pascal, wretched boy! what would you do?"

He was so surprised that his weapon fell from his hand, and he sank back almost fainting in his arm-chair. The idea of denying his intention never once occurred to him; besides, he was unable to articulate a word. But on his desk there lay a letter addressed to his mother which would speak for him.

Madame Ferailleur took it up, tore the envelope open, and read: "Forgive me—I'm about to die. It must be so. I cannot survive dishonour; and I *am* dishonoured."

"Dishonoured!—you!" exclaimed the heart-broken mother. "My God! what does this mean? Speak. I implore you: tell me all—you must. I command you to do so. I command you!"

He complied with this at once supplicating and imperious behest, and related in a despairing voice the events which had wrought his woe. He did not omit a singular particular, but tried rather to exaggerate than palliate the horrors of his situation. Perhaps he found a strange satisfaction in proving to himself that there was no hope left; possibly he believed his mother would say: "Yes, you are right; and death is your only refuge!"

As Madame Ferailleur listened, however, her eyes dilated with fear and horror, and she scarcely realised whether she were awake or in the midst of some frightful dream. For this was one of those unexpected catastrophes which are beyond the range of human foresight or even imagination, and which her mind could scarcely conceive or admit. But *she* did not doubt him, even though his friends had doubted him. Indeed, if he had himself told her that he was guilty of cheating at cards, she would have refused to believe him. When his story was ended, she exclaimed: "And you wished to kill yourself! Did you not think, senseless boy! that your death would give an appearance of truth to this vile calumny?"

With a mother's wonderful, sublime instinct, she had found the most powerful reason that could be urged to induce Pascal to live. "Did you not feel, my son, that it showed a lack of courage on your part to brand yourself and your name with eternal infamy, in order to escape your present sufferings? This thought ought to have stayed your hand. An honest name is a sacred trust which no one has a right to abuse. Your father bequeathed it to you, pure and untarnished, and so you must preserve it. If others try to cover it with opprobium, you must live to defend it."

He lowered his head despondently, and in a tone of profound discouragement, he replied: "But what can I do? How can I escape from the web which has been woven around me with such fiendish cunning? If I had possessed my usual presence of mind at the moment of the accusation, I might have defended and justified myself, perhaps. But now the misfortune is irreparable. How can I unmask the traitor, and what proofs of his guilt can I cast in his face?"

"All the same, you ought not to yield without a struggle," interrupted Madame Ferailleur, sternly. "It is wrong to abandon a task because it is difficult; it must be accepted, and, even if one perish in the struggle, there is, at least, the sactisfaction of feeling that one has not failed in duty."

"But, mother—"

"I must not keep the truth from you, Pascal! What! are you lacking in energy? Come, my son, rise and raise your head. I shall not let you fight alone. I will fight with you."

Without speaking a word, Pascal caught hold of his mother's hands and pressed them to his lips. His face was wet with tears. His overstrained nerves relaxed under the soothing influence of maternal tenderness and devotion. Reason, too, had regained her ascendency. His mother's noble words found an echo in his own heart, and he now looked upon suicide as an act of madness and cowardice. Madame Ferailleur felt that the victory was assured, but this did not suffice; she wished to enlist Pascal in her plans. "It is evident," she resumed, "that M. de Coralth is the author of this abominable plot. But what could have been his object? Has he any reason to fear you, Pascal? Has he confided to you, or have you discovered, any secret that might ruin him if it were divulged?"

"No, mother."

"Then he must be the vile instrument of some even more despicable being. Reflect, my son. Have you wounded any of your friends? Are you sure that you are in nobody's way? Consider carefully. Your profession has its dangers; and those who adopt it must expect to make bitter enemies."

Pascal trembled. It seemed to him as if a ray of light at last illumined the darkness—a dim and uncertain ray, it is true, but still a gleam of light.

"Who knows!" he muttered, "who knows!"

Madame Ferailleur reflected a few moments, and the nature of her reflections brought a flush to her brow. "This is one of those cases in which a mother should overstep reserve," said she. "If you had a mistress, my son—"

"I have none," he answered, promptly. Then his own face flushed, and after an instant's hesitation, he added: "But I entertain the most profound and reverent love for a young girl, the most beautiful and chaste being on earth—a girl who, in intelligence and heart, is worthy of you, my own mother."

Madame Ferailleur nodded her head gravely, as much as to say that she had expected to find a woman at the bottom of the mystery. "And who is this young girl?" she inquired. "What is her name?"

"Marguerite."

"Marguerite who?"

Pascal's embarrassment increased. "She has no other name," he replied, hurriedly, "and she does not know her parents. She formerly lived in our street with her companion, Madame Léon, and an old female servant. It was there that I saw her for the first time. She now lives in the house of the Count de Chalusse, in the Rue de Courcelles."

"In what capacity?"

"The count has always taken care of her—she owes her education to him. He acts as her guardian; and although she has never spoken to me on the subject, I fancy that the Count de Chalusse is her father."

"And does this girl love you, Pascal?"

"I believe so, mother. She has promised me that she will have no other husband than myself."

"And the count?"

"He doesn't know—he doesn't even suspect anything about it. Day after day I have been trying to gather courage to tell you everything, and to ask you to go to the Count de Chalusse. But my position is so modest as yet. The count is immensely rich, and he intends to give Marguerite an enormous fortune—two millions, I believe—"

Madame Ferailleur interrupted him with a gesture. "Look no further," she said; "you have found the explanation."

Pascal sprang to his feet with crimson cheeks, flaming eyes, and quivering lips. "It may be so," he exclaimed, "it may be so! The count's immense fortune may have tempted some miserable scoundrel. Who knows but some one may have been watching Marguerite, and have discovered that I am an obstacle?"

"Something told me that my suspicions were correct," said Madame Ferailleur. "I had no proofs, and yet I felt sure of it."

Pascal was absorbed in thought. "And what a strange coincidence," he eventually remarked. "Do you know, the last time I saw Marguerite, a week ago, she seemed so sad and anxious that I felt alarmed. I questioned her, but at first she would not answer. After a little while, however, as I insisted, she said: 'Ah, well, I fear the count is planning a marriage for me. M. de Chalusse has not said a word to me on the subject, but he has recently had several long conferences in private with a young man whose father rendered him a great service in former years. And this young man, whenever I meet him, looks at me in such a peculiar manner.'"

"What is his name?" asked Madame Ferailleur.

"I don't know—she didn't mention it; and her words so disturbed me that I did not think of asking. But she will tell me. This evening, if I don't succeed in obtaining an interview, I will write to her. If your suspicions are correct, mother, our secret is in the hands of three persons, and so it is a secret no longer—"

He paused suddenly to listen. The noise of a spirited altercation between the servant and some visitor, came from the ante-room. "I tell you that he *is* at home," said someone in a panting voice, "and I must see him and speak with him at once. It is such an urgent matter that I left a card-party just at the most critical moment to come here."

"I assure you, monsieur, that M. Ferailleur has gone out."

"Very well; I will wait for him, then. Take me to a room where I can sit down."

Pascal turned pale, for he recognised the voice of the individual who had

suggested searching him at Madame d'Argelès' house. Nevertheless, he opened the door; and a man, with a face like a full moon, and who was puffing and panting like a locomotive, came forward with the assurance of a person who thinks he may do anything he chooses by reason of his wealth. "Zounds!" he exclaimed. "I knew perfectly well that you were here. You don't recognise me, perhaps, my dear sir. I am Baron Trigault—I came to—"

The words died away on his lips, and he became as embarrassed as if he had not possessed an income of eight hundred thousand francs a year. The fact is he had just perceived Madame Ferailleur. He bowed to her, and then, with a significant glance at Pascal he said: "I should like to speak to you in private, monsieur, in reference to a matter—"

Great as was Pascal's astonishment, he showed none of it on his face. "You can speak in my mother's presence," he replied, coldly; "she knows everything."

The baron's surprise found vent in a positive distortion of his features. "Ah!" said he, in three different tones, "ah! ah!" And as no one had offered him a seat, he approached an arm-chair and took possession of it, exclaiming, "You will allow me, I trust? Those stairs have put me in such a state!"

In spite of his unwieldy appearance, this wealthy man was endowed with great natural shrewdness and an unusually active mind. And while he pretended to be engaged in recovering his breath he studied the room and its occupants. A revolver was lying on the floor beside a torn and crumpled letter, and tears were still glittering in the eyes of Madame Ferailleur and her son. A keen observer needed no further explanation of the scene.

"I will not conceal from you, monsieur," began the baron, "that I have been led here by certain compunctions of conscience." And, misinterpreting a gesture which Pascal made, "I mean what I say," he continued; "compunctions of conscience. I have them occasionally. Your departure this morning, after that—deplorable scene, caused certain doubts and suspicions to arise in my mind; and I said to myself, 'We have been too hasty; perhaps this young man may not be guilty.'"

"Monsieur!" interrupted Pascal, in a threatening tone.

"Excuse me, allow me to finish, if you please. Reflection, I must confess, only confirmed this impression, and increased my doubts. 'The devil!' I said to myself again; "if this young man is innocent, the culprit must be one of the *habitués* of Madame d'Argelès' house—that is to say, a man with whom I play twice a week, and whom I shall play with again next Monday.' And then I became uneasy, and here I am!" Was the absurd reason which the baron gave for his visit the true one? It was difficult to decide. "I came," he continued, "thinking that a look at your home would teach me something; and now I have seen it, I am ready to take my oath that you are the victim of a vile conspiracy."

So saying he noisily blew his nose, but this did not prevent him from observing the quiet joy of Pascal and his mother. They were amazed. But although these words were calculated to make them feel intensely happy, they still looked at their visitor with distrust. It is not natural for a person to interest himself in other people's misfortunes, unless he has some special motive for doing so; and what could this singular man's object be?

However, he did not seem in the slightest degree disconcerted by the glacial reserve with which his advances were received. "It is clear that you are in some one's way," he resumed, "and that this some one has in-

vented this method of ruining you. There can be no question about it. The intention became manifest to my mind the moment I read the paragraph concerning you in the *Figaro*. Have you seen it? Yes? Well, what do you think of it? I would be willing to swear that it was written from notes furnished by your enemy. Moreover, the particulars are incorrect, and I am going to write a line of correction which I shall take to the office myself." So saying he transported his unwieldy person to Pascal's desk, and hastily wrote as follows: "Mr. Editor,—As a witness of the scene that took place at Madame d' A—s' house last night, allow me to make an important correction. It is only too true that extra cards were introduced into the pack, but that they were introduced by M. F— is not proven, since he was *not seen* to do it. I know that appearances are against him, but he nevertheless possesses my entire confidence and esteem.

"Baron Trigault."

Meanwhile Madame Ferailleur and her son had exchanged significant glances. Their impressions were the same. This man could not be an enemy. When the baron had finished his letter, and had read it aloud, Pascal, who was deeply moved, exclaimed: "I do not know how to express my gratitude to you, monsieur; but if you really wish to serve me, pray don't send that note. It would cause you a great deal of trouble and annoyance, and I should none the less be obliged to relinquish the practice of my profession—besides, I am especially anxious to be forgotten for a time."

"So be it—I understand you; you hope to discover the traitor, and you do not wish to put him on his guard. I approve of your prudence. But remember my words: if you ever need a helping hand, rap at my door; and when you hold the necessary proofs, I will furnish you with the means of rendering your justification even more startling than the affront." He prepared to go, but before crossing the threshold, he turned and said: "In future I shall watch the fingers of the player who sits on my left hand. And if I were in your place, I would obtain the notes from which that newspaper article was written. One never knows the benefit that may be derived, at a certain moment, from a page of writing."

As he started off, Madame Ferailleur sprang from her chair. "Pascal," she exclaimed, "that man knows something, and your enemies are his; I read it in his eyes. He, too, distrusts M. de Coralth."

"I understood him, mother, and my mind is made up. I must disappear. From this moment Pascal Ferailleur no longer exists."

That same evening two large vans were standing outside Madame Ferailleur's house. She had sold her furniture without reserve, and was starting to join her son, who had already left for Le Hâvre, she said, in view of sailing to America.

VI.

"There are a number of patients waiting for me. I will drop in again about midnight. I still have several urgent visits to make." Thus had Dr. Jodon spoken to Mademoiselle Marguerite; and yet, when he left the Hôtel de Chalusse, after assuring himself that Casimir would have some straw spread over the street, the doctor quietly walked home. The visits he had spoken of merely existed in his imagination; but it was a part of his rôle to appear to be overrun with patients. To tell the truth, the only patient he had had to attend to that week was a superannuated porter,

living in the Rue de la Pépinière, and whom he visited twice a day, for want of something better to do. The remainder of his time was spent in waiting for patients who never came, and in cursing the profession of medicine, which was ruined, he declared, by excessive competition, combined with certain rules of decorum which hampered young practitioners beyond endurance.

However, if Dr. Jodon had devoted one half of the time he spent in cursing and building castles in the air to study, he might have, perhaps, raised his little skill to the height of his immense ambition. But neither work nor patience formed any part of his system. He was a man of the present age, and wished to rise speedily with as little trouble as possible. A certain amount of display and assurance, a little luck, and a good deal of advertising would, in his opinion, suffice to bring about this result. It was with this conviction, indeed, that he had taken up his abode in the Rue de Courcelles, situated in one of the most aristocratic quarters of Paris. But so far, events had shown his theory to be incorrect. In spite of the greatest economy, very cleverly concealed, he had seen the little capital which constituted his entire fortune dwindle away. He had originally possessed but twenty thousand francs, a sum which in no wise corresponded with his lofty pretensions. He had paid his rent that very morning; and he could not close his eyes to the fact that the time was near at hand when he would be unable to pay it. What should he do then? When he thought of this contingency, and it was a subject that filled his mind to the exclusion of all other matters, he felt the fires of wrath and hatred kindle in his soul. He utterly refused to regard himself as the cause of his own misfortunes; on the contrary, following the example of many other disappointed individuals, he railed at mankind and everything in general—at circumstances, envious acquaintances, and enemies, whom he certainly did not possess.

At times he was capable of doing almost anything to gratify his lust for gold, for the privations which he had endured so long were like oil cast upon the flame of covetousness which was ever burning in his breast. In calmer moments he asked himself at what other door he could knock, in view of hastening the arrival of Fortune. Sometimes he thought of turning dentist, or of trying to find some capitalist who would join him in manufacturing one of those patent medicines which are warranted to yield their promoters a hundred thousand francs a year. On other occasions he dreamed of establishing a monster pharmacy, or of opening a private hospital. But money was needed to carry out any one of these plans, and he had no money. There was the rub. However, the time was fast approaching when he must decide upon his course; he could not possibly hold out much longer.

His third year of practice in the Rue de Courcelles had not yielded him enough to pay his servant's wages. For he had a servant, of course. He had a valet for the same reason as he had a suite of rooms of a superficially sumptuous aspect. Faithful to his system, or, rather, to his master's system, he had sacrificed everything to show. The display of gilding in his apartments was such as to make a man of taste shut his eyes to escape the sight of it. There were gorgeous carpets and hangings, frescoed ceilings, spurious objects of *virtu*, and pier-tables loaded with ornaments. An unsophisticated youth from the country would certainly have been dazzled; but it would not do to examine these things too closely. There was more cotton than silk in the velvet covering of the furniture; and if various statuettes placed on brackets at a certain height had been closely inspected, it would have been found that they were of mere plaster, hidden beneath a coating of

green paint, sprinkled with copper filings. This plaster, playing the part of bronze, was in perfect keeping with the man, his system, and the present age.

When the doctor reached home, his first question to his servant was as usual: "Has any one called?"

"No one."

The doctor sighed, and passing through his superb waiting-room, he entered his consulting sanctum, and seated himself in the chimney corner beside an infinitesimal fire. He was even more thoughtful than usual. The scene which he had just witnessed at the Count de Chalusse's house recurred to his mind, and he turned it over and over again in his brain, striving to find some way by which he might derive an advantage from the mystery. For he was more than ever convinced that there was a mystery. He had been engrossed in these thoughts for some time, when his meditations were disturbed by a ring at the bell. Who could be calling at this hour?

The question was answered by his servant, who appeared and informed him that a lady, who was in a great hurry, was waiting in the reception-room. "Very well," was his reply; "but it is best to let her wait a few moments." For he had at least this merit: he never deviated from his system. Under no circumstances whatever would he have admitted a patient immediately; he wished him to wait so that he might have an opportunity of reflecting on the advantages of consulting a physician whose time was constantly occupied.

However, when ten minutes or so had elapsed, he opened the door, and a tall lady came quickly forward, throwing back the veil which had concealed her face. She must have been over forty-five; and if she had ever been handsome, there was nothing to indicate it now. She had brown hair, thickly sprinkled with grey, but very coarse and abundant, and growing low over her forehead; her nose was broad and flat; her lips were thick, and her eyes were dull and expressionless. However, her manners were gentle and rather melancholy; and one would have judged her to be somewhat of a devotee. Still for the time being she seemed greatly agitated. She seated herself at the doctor's invitation; and without waiting for him to ask any questions: "I ought to tell you at once, monsieur," she began, "that I am the Count de Chalusse's housekeeper."

In spite of his self-control, the doctor bounded from his chair. "Madame Léon?" he asked, in a tone of intense surprise.

She bowed, compressing her thick lips. "I am known by that name—yes, monsieur. But it is only my christian name. The one I have a right to bear would not accord with my present position. Reverses of fortune are not rare in these days; and were it not for the consoling influences of religion, one would not have strength to endure them."

The physician was greatly puzzled. "What can she want of me?" he thought.

Meanwhile, she had resumed speaking: "I was much reduced in circumstances—at the end of my resources, indeed—when M. de Chalusse—a family friend—requested me to act as companion to a young girl in whom he was interested—Mademoiselle Marguerite. I accepted the position; and I thank God every day that I did so, for I feel a mother's affection for this young girl, and she loves me as fondly as if she were my own daughter." In support of her assertion, she drew a handkerchief from her pocket, and succeeded in forcing a few tears to her eyes. "Under these circumstances, doctor," she continued, "you cannot fail to understand that

the interests of my dearly beloved Marguerite bring me to you. I was shut up in my own room when M. de Chalusse was brought home, and I did not hear of his illness until after your departure. Perhaps you might say that I ought to have waited until your next visit; but I had not sufficient patience to do so. One cannot submit without a struggle to the torture of suspense, when the future of a beloved daughter is at stake. So here I am." She paused to take breath, and then added, "I have come, monsieur, to ask you to tell me the exact truth respecting the count's condition."

The doctor was expecting something very different, but nevertheless he replied with all due gravity and self-possession. "It is my painful duty to tell you, madame, that there is scarcely any hope, and that I expect a fatal termination within twenty-four hours, unless the patient should regain consciousness."

The housekeeper turned pale. "Then all is lost," she faltered, "all is lost!" And unable to articulate another word she rose to her feet, bowed, and abruptly left the room.

Before the grate, with his mouth half-open, and his right arm extended in an interrupted gesture, the doctor stood speechless and disconcerted. It was only when the outer door closed with a bang that he seemed restored to consciousness. And as he heard the noise he sprang forward as if to recall his visitor. "Ah!" he exclaimed, with an oath, "the miserable old woman was mocking me!" And urged on by a wild, irrational impulse, he caught up his hat and darted out in pursuit. Madame Léon was considerably in advance of him, and was walking very quickly; still, by quickening his pace, he might have overtaken her. However, he did not join her, for he scarcely knew what excuse to offer for such a strange proceeding; he contented himself by cautiously following her at a little distance. Suddenly she stopped short. It was in front of a tobacconist's shop, where there was a post office letter-box. The shop was closed, but the box was there with its little slit for letters to be dropped into. Madame Léon evidently hesitated. She paused, as one always does before venturing upon a decisive act, from which there will be no return, whatever may be the consequences. An observer never remains twenty minutes before a letter-box without witnessing this pantomime so expressive of irresolution. At last, however, she shrugged her shoulders with a gesture which eloquently expressed the result of her deliberations; and drawing a letter from her bosom, she dropped it into the box, and then hastened on more quickly than before.

"There is not the slightest doubt," thought the doctor, "that letter had been prepared in advance, and whether it should be sent or not depended on the answer I gave."

We have already said that M. Jodon was not a wealthy man, and yet he would willingly have given a hundred-franc note to have known the contents of this letter, or even the name of the person to whom it was addressed. But his chase was almost ended. Madame Léon had reached the Hôtel de Chalusse, and now went in. Should he follow her? His curiosity was torturing him to such a degree that he had an idea of doing so; and it required an heroic effort of will to resist the temptation successfully. But a gleam of common sense warned him that this would be a terrible blunder. Once already during the evening his conduct had attracted attention; and he began to realise that there was a better way of winning confidence than by intruding almost forcibly into other people's affairs. Accordingly he thoughtfully retraced his steps, feeling intensely disgusted with himself.

"What a fool I am!" he grumbled. "If I had kept the old woman in suspense, instead of blurting out the truth, I might have learned the real object of her visit; for she had an object. But what was it?"

The doctor spent the two hours that remained to him before making his second visit in trying to discover it. But, although nothing prevented him from exploring the boundless fields of improbable possibilities, he could think of nothing satisfactory. There was only one certain point, that Madame Léon and Mademoiselle Marguerite were equally interested in the question as to whether the count would regain consciousness or not. As to their interests in the matter, the doctor felt confident that they were not identical; he was persuaded that a secret enmity existed between them, and that the housekeeper had visited him without Mademoiselle Marguerite's knowledge. For he was not deceived by Madame Léon, or by her pretended devotion to Mademoiselle Marguerite. Her manner, her smooth words, her tone of pious resignation, and the allusion to the grand name she had the right to bear, were all calculated to impose upon one; but she had been too much disconcerted towards the last to remember her part. Dr. Jodon lacked the courage to return to his sumptuous rooms, and it was in a little café that he thus reflected upon the situation, while drinking some execrable beer brewed in Paris out of a glass manufactured in Bavaria.

At last midnight sounded—the hour had come. Still the doctor did not move. Having been obliged to wait himself, he wished, in revenge, to make the others wait, and it was not until the café closed that he again walked up the Rue de Courcelles. Madame Léon had left the gate ajar, and the doctor had no difficulty in making his way into the courtyard. As in the earlier part of the evening, the servants were assembled in the concierge's lodge; but the careless gaiety which shone upon their faces a few hours before had given place to evident anxiety respecting their future prospects. Through the windows of the lodge they could be seen standing round the two choice spirits of the household, M. Bourigeau, the concierge, and M. Casimir, the valet, who were engaged in earnest conversation. And if the doctor had listened, he would have heard such words as "wages," and "legacies," and "remuneration for faithful service," and "annuities" repeated over and over again.

But M. Jodon did not listen. Thinking he should find some servant inside, he entered the house. However, there was nobody to announce his presence; the door closed noiselessly behind him, the heavy carpet which covered the marble steps stifled the sound of his footsteps, and he ascended the first flight without seeing anyone. The door opening into the count's room was open, the room itself being brilliantly lighted by a large fire, and a lamp which stood on a corner of the mantel-shelf. Instinctively the doctor paused and looked in. There had been no change since his first visit. The count was still lying motionless on his pillows; his face was swollen, his eyelids were closed, but he still breathed, as was shown by the regular movement of the covering over his chest. Madame Léon and Mademoiselle Marguerite were his only attendants. The housekeeper, who sat back a little in the shade, was half reclining in an arm-chair with her hands clasped in her lap, her lips firmly compressed, and her eyes fixed upon vacancy. Pale but calm, and more imposing and more beautiful than ever, Mademoiselle Marguerite was kneeling beside the bed, eagerly watching for some sign of renewed life and intelligence on the count's face.

A little ashamed of his indiscretion, the doctor retreated seven or eight steps down the stairs, and then ascended them again, coughing slightly, so

as to announce his approach. This time he was heard, for Mademoiselle Marguerite came to the door to meet him. "Well?" he inquired.

"Alas!"

He advanced towards the bed, but before he had time to examine his patient Mademoiselle Marguerite handed him a scrap of paper. "The physician who usually attends M. de Chalusse has been here in your absence, monsieur," said she. "This is his prescription, and we have already administered a few drops of the potion."

M. Jodon, who was expecting this blow, bowed coldly.

"I must add," continued Mademoiselle Marguerite, "that the doctor approved of all that had been done; and I beg you will unite your skill with his in treating the case."

Unfortunately all the medical skill of the faculty would have availed nothing here. After another examination, Dr. Jodon declared that it would be necessary to wait for the action of nature, but that he must be informed of the slightest change in the sick man's condition. "And I will tell my servant to wake me at once if I am sent for," he added.

He was already leaving the room, when Madame Léon barred his passage. "Isn't it true, doctor, that one attentive person would suffice to watch over the count?" she asked.

"Most assuredly," he answered.

The housekeeper turned towards Mademoiselle Marguerite. "Ah, you see, my dear young lady," she said, "what did I tell you? Listen to me; take a little rest. Watching is not suitable work for one of your age—"

"It is useless to insist," interrupted the young girl, resolutely. "I shall remain here. I shall watch over him myself."

The housekeeper made no reply; but it seemed to the doctor that the two women exchanged singular glances. "The devil!" he muttered, as he took his departure, "one might think that they distrusted each other!"

Perhaps he was right; but at all events he had scarcely left the house before Madame Léon again urged her dear young lady to take a few hours' rest. "What can you fear?" she insisted, in her wheedling voice. "Sha'n t I be here? Do you suppose your old Léon capable of losing herself in sleep, when your future depends upon a word from that poor man lying there?"

"Pray, cease."

"Ah, no! my dear young lady; my love for you compels me—"

"Oh, enough!" interrupted Mademoiselle Marguerite; "enough, Léon!"

Her tone was so determined that the housekeeper was compelled to yield; but not without a deep sigh, not without an imploring glance to Heaven, as if calling upon Providence to witness the purity of her motives and the usefulness of her praiseworthy efforts. "At least, my dear lady, wrap yourself up warmly. Shall I go and bring you your heavy travelling shawl?"

"Thanks, my dear Léon—Annette will bring it."

"Then, pray, send for it. But we are not going to watch alone? What should we do if we needed anything?"

"I will call," replied Marguerite.

This was unnecessary, for Dr. Jodon's departure from the house had put an abrupt termination to the servants' conference; and they were now assembled on the landing, anxious and breathless, and peering eagerly into the sick-room.

Mademoiselle Marguerite went towards them. "Madame Léon and myself will remain with the count," she said. "Annette"—this was the woman

whom she liked best of all the servants—"Casimir and a footman will spend the night in the little side *salon*. The others may retire."

Her orders were obeyed. Two o'clock sounded from the church-tower near by, and then the solemn and terrible silence was only broken by the hard breathing of the unconscious man and the implacable tic-tac of the clock on the mantel-shelf, numbering the seconds which were left for him to live. From the streets outside, not a sound reached this princely abode, which stood between a vast courtyard and a garden as large as a park. Moreover, the straw which had been spread over the paving-stones effectually deadened the rumble of the few vehicles that passed. Enveloped in a soft warm shawl, Madame Léon had again taken possession of her arm-chair, and while she pretended to be reading a prayer-book, she kept a close watch over her dear young lady, as if she were striving to discover her inmost thoughts. Mademoiselle Marguerite did not suspect this affectionate espionage. Besides, what would it have mattered to her? She had rolled a low arm-chair near the bedside, seated herself in it, and her eyes were fixed upon M. de Chalusse. Two or three times she started violently, and once even she said to Madame Léon: "Come—come and see!"

It seemed to her that there was a faint change in the patient's face; but it was only a fancy—she had been deceived by the shadows that played about the room, caused by the capricious flame in the grate. The hours were creeping on, and the housekeeper, wearying at last of her fruitless watch, dropped asleep; her head fell forward on to her breast, her prayer-book slipped from her hands, and finally she began to snore. But Mademoiselle Marguerite did not perceive this, absorbed as she was in thoughts which, by reason of their very profundity, had ceased to be sorrowful. Perhaps she felt she was keeping a last vigil over her happiness, and that with the final breath of this dying man all her girlhood's dreams and all her dearest hopes would take flight for evermore. Undoubtedly her thoughts flew to the man to whom she had promised her life—to Pascal, to the unfortunate fellow whose honour was being stolen from him at that very moment, in a fashionable gaming-house.

About five o'clock the air became so close that she felt a sudden faintness, and opened the window to obtain a breath of fresh air. The noise aroused Madame Léon from her slumbers. She rose, yawned, and rather sullenly declared that she felt very queer, and would certainly fall ill if she did not take some refreshment. It became necessary to summon M. Casimir, who brought her a glass of Madeira and some biscuits. "Now I feel better," she murmured, after her repast. "My excessive sensibility will be the death of me." And so saying, she dropped asleep again.

Mademoiselle Marguerite had meanwhile returned to her seat; but her thoughts gradually became confused, her eyelids grew heavy, and although she struggled, she at last fell asleep in her turn, with her head resting on the count's bed. It was daylight when a strange and terrible shock awoke her. It seemed to her as if an icy hand, some dead person's hand, was gently stroking her head, and tenderly caressing her hair. She at once sprang to her feet. The sick man had regained consciousness; his eyes were open and his right arm was moving. Mademoiselle Marguerite darted to the bell-rope and pulled it violently, and as a servant appeared in answer to the summons, she cried: "Run for the physician who lives near here—quick! —and tell him that the count is conscious."

In an instant, almost, the sick-room was full of servants, but the girl did not perceive it. She had approached M. de Chalusse, and taking his hand,

she tenderly asked: "You hear me, do you not, monsieur? Do you understand me?"

His lips moved; but only a hollow, rattling sound, which was absolutely unintelligible, came from his throat. Still, he understood her; as it was easy to see by his gestures—despairing and painful ones, for paralysis had not released its hold on its victim, and it was only with great difficulty that he could slightly move his right arm. He evidently desired something. But what?

They mentioned the different articles in the room—everything indeed that they could think of. But in vain, until the housekeeper suddenly exclaimed: "He wishes to write."

That was, indeed, what he desired. With the hand that was comparatively free, with the hoarse rattle that was his only voice, M. de Chalusse answered, "Yes, yes!" and his eyes even turned to Madame Léon with an expression of joy and gratitude. They raised him on his pillows, and brought him a small writing-desk, with some paper, and a pen that had been dipped in ink. But like those around him, he had himself overestimated his strength; if he could move his hand, he could not *control* its movements. After a terrible effort and intense suffering, however, he succeeded in tracing a few words, the meaning of which it was impossible to understand. It was only with the greatest difficulty that these words could be deciphered—"My entire fortune—give—friends—against——" This signified nothing.

In despair, he dropped the pen, and his glance and his hand turned to that part of the room opposite his bed. "Monsieur means his escritoire, perhaps?"

"Yes, yes," the sick man hoarsely answered.

"Perhaps the count wishes that it should be opened?"

"Yes, yes!" was the reply again.

"My God!" exclaimed Mademoiselle Marguerite, with a gesture of despair, "what have I done? I have broken the key. I feared the responsibility which would fall upon us all."

The expression of the count's face had become absolutely frightful. It indicated utter discouragement, the most bitter suffering, the most horrible despair. His soul was writhing in a body from which life had fled. Intelligence, mind, and will were fast bound in a corpse which they could not electrify. The consciousness of his own powerlessness caused him a paroxysm of frantic rage; his hands clinched, the veins in his throat swelled, his eyes almost started from their sockets, and in a harsh, shrill voice that had nothing human in it, he exclaimed: "Marguerite!—despoiled!—take care!—your mother!" And this was all—it was the supreme effort that broke the last link that bound the soul to earth.

"A priest!" cried Madame Léon, "a priest! In the name of Heaven, go for a priest!"

"Rather for a notary," suggested M. Casimir. "You see he wishes to make a will."

But at that moment the physician entered, pale and breathless. He walked straight to the bedside, glanced at the motionless form, and solemnly exclaimed: "The Count de Chalusse is dead!"

There was a moment's stupor—the stupor which always follows death, especially when death comes suddenly and unexpectedly. A feeling of mingled wonder, selfishness, and fear pervaded the group of servants. "Yes, it is over!" muttered the doctor, "it is all over!"

And as he was familiar with these painful scenes, and had lost none of his self-possession, he furtively studied Mademoiselle Marguerite's features and attitude. She seemed thunderstruck. With dry, fixed eyes and contracted features, she stood rooted to her place, gazing at the lifeless form as if she were expecting some miracle—as if she still hoped to hear those rigid lips reveal the secret which he had tried in vain to disclose, and which he had carried with him to the grave.

The physician was the only person who observed this. The other occupants of the room were exchanging looks of distress. Some of the women had fallen upon their knees, and were sobbing and praying in the same breath. But Madame Léon's sobs could be heard above the rest. They were at first inarticulate moans, but suddenly she sprang towards Mademoiselle Marguerite, and clasping her in her arms, she cried: "What a misfortune! My dearest child, what a loss!" Utterly incapable of uttering a word, the poor girl tried to free herself from this close embrace, but the housekeeper would not be repulsed, and continued: "Weep, my dear young lady, weep! Do not refuse to give vent to your sorrow."

She herself displayed so little self-control that the physician reprimanded her with considerable severity, whereat her emotion increased, and with her handkerchief pressed to her eyes, she sobbed: "Yes, doctor, yes; you are right; I ought to moderate my grief. But pray, doctor, remove my beloved Marguerite from this scene, which is too terrible for her young and tender heart. Persuade her to retire to her own room, so that she may ask God for strength to bear the misfortune which has befallen her."

The poor girl had certainly no intention of leaving the room, but before she could say so, M. Casimir stepped forward. "I think," he drily observed, "that mademoiselle had better remain here."

"Eh?" said Madame Léon, looking up suddenly. "And why, if you please?"

"Because—because—"

Anger had dried the housekeeper's tears. "What do you mean?" she asked. "Do you pretend to prevent mademoiselle from doing as she chooses in her own house?"

M. Casimir gave vent to a contemptuous whistle, which, twenty-four hours earlier, would have been punished with a heavy blow from the man who was now lying there—dead. "Her own house!" he answered; "her own house! Yesterday I shouldn't have denied it; but to-day it's quite another thing. Is she a relative? No, she isn't. What are you talking about, then? We are all equals here."

He spoke so impudently that even the doctor felt indignant. "Scoundrel!" said he.

But the valet turned towards him with an air which proved that he was well acquainted with the doctor's servant, and, consequently, with all the secrets of the master's life. "Call your own valet a scoundrel, if you choose," he retorted, "but not me. Your duties here are over, aren't they? So leave us to manage our own affairs. Thank heaven, I know what I'm talking about. Everybody knows that caution must be exercised in a dead man's house, especially when that house is full of money, and when, instead of relatives, there are—persons who—who are there nobody knows how or why. In case any valuables were missed, who would be accused of taking them? Why, the poor servants, of course. Ah, they have broad shoulders! Their trunks would be searched; and even if nothing were found, they would be sent to prison all the same. In the meantime other

people would escape with the booty. No, Lisette! No one will stir from this room until the arrival of the justice—"

Madame Léon was bursting with rage. "All right!" she interrupted; "I'm going to send for the count's particular friend, General—"

"I don't care a fig for your General."

"Wretch!"

It was Mademoiselle Marguerite who put an end to this indecent dispute. Its increasing violence had aroused her from her stupor. Casimir's impudence brought a flush to her forehead, and stepping forward with haughty resolution, she exclaimed: "You forget that one never raises one's voice in the chamber of death." Her words were so true, and her manner so majestic, that M. Casimir was silenced. Then, pointing to the door, she coldly added: "Go for the justice of the peace, and don't set foot here again, except in his company."

He bowed, stammered an unintelligible apology, and left the room. "She always gets the best of me," he growled, as he went downstairs. "But seals shall be put on everything."

When he entered the porter's lodge, M. Bourigeau was just getting up, having slept all night, while his wife watched. "Quick," ordered M. Casimir; "make haste and finish dressing, and run for the justice of the peace—we must have him here at once. Everything must be done regularly and in order, upstairs."

The concierge was in despair. "Heavens!" he exclaimed; "so the master's dead! What a misfortune!"

"You may well say so; and this is the second time such a thing has happened to me. I remember now what a shrewd fellow named Chupin once said to me. 'If I were a servant,' he remarked, 'before entering a man's service, I'd make him insure his life for my benefit in one of those new-fangled companies, so that I might step into a handsome fortune if he took it into his head to die.' But make haste, Bourigeau."

"That's a famous idea, but scarcely practicable," growled the concierge.

"I don't know whether it is or not. But at all events I'm terribly annoyed. The count was giving me enormous wages, and I had got him nicely into my ways. Well, after all, I shall only have to begin again!"

M. Bourigeau had not yet attained to the heights of such serene philosophy, and as he buttoned his overcoat, he groaned: "Ah! you're not situated as I am, Casimir. You've only yourself to look out for. I have my furniture; and if I don't succeed in finding a position where I can have two rooms, I shall be obliged to sell part of it. What a blessed nuisance!"

As soon as he was dressed he started off on his mission; and M. Casimir, who dared not return to the house, began walking slowly to and fro in front of the lodge. He had made some thirty turns or so, and was beginning to feel impatient, when he saw Victor Chupin approaching. "You are always on hand at the right moment," remarked M. Casimir. "It's all over!"

Chupin turned eagerly. "Then our bargain holds," he exclaimed. "You understand what I mean—the funeral, you know."

"It isn't certain that I shall have anything to do with it; but call again in three hours from now."

"All right, I'll be here."

"And M. Fortunat?" asked Casimir.

"He received what he called a 'violent shock' last evening, but he's better this morning. He instructed me to tell you that he should look for you between twelve and one—you know where."

"I'll endeavour to be there, although it may be difficult for me to get away. If I go, however, I'll show him the letter that caused the count's illness; for the count threw it away, after tearing it into several pieces, and I found some of the bits which escaped his notice as well as mademoiselle's. It's a strange letter, upon my word!"

Chupin gazed at the valet with a look of mingled wonder and admiration. "By Jove!" he exclaimed, "how fortunate a man must be to secure a valet like you!"

His companion smiled complacently, but all of a sudden he remarked: "Make haste and go. I see Bourigeau in the distance, bringing the justice of the peace."

VII.

THE magistrate who was now approaching the Chalusse mansion in the concierge's company, exemplified in a remarkable manner all the ideas that are awakened in one's mind by the grand yet simple title of "Justice of the Peace." He was the very person you would like to think of as the family magistrate; as the promoter of friendly feeling; as the guardian of the rights of the absent, the young, and the weak; as the just arbiter in unfortunate differences between those who are closely related; a sage of wide experience and boundless benevolence; a judge whose paternal justice dispenses with all pomp and display, and who is allowed by French statutes to hold his court by his own fireside, providing the doors stand open. He was considerably over fifty, tall, and very thin, with bent shoulders. His clothes was rather old-fashioned in cut, but by no means ridiculous. The expression of his face was gentleness itself; but it would not have done to presume upon this gentleness, for his glance was keen and piercing—like the glance of all who are expert in diving into consciences, and discovering the secrets hidden there. Moreover, like all men who are accustomed to deliberate in public, his features were expressionless. He could see and hear everything, suspect and understand everything, without letting a muscle of his face move. And yet the *habitués* of his audience-chamber, and his clerks, pretended that they could always detect the nature of his impressions. A ring which he wore upon one of his fingers served as a barometer for those who knew him. If a difficult case, or one that embarrassed his conscience, presented itself, his eyes fixed themselves obstinately upon this ring. If he were satisfied that everything was right, he looked up again, and began playing with the ring, slipping it up and down between the first and second joint of his finger; but if he were displeased, he abruptly turned the bezel inside.

In appearance, he was sufficiently imposing to intimidate even M. Casimir. The proud valet bowed low as the magistrate approached, and with his heart in his mouth, and in an obsequious voice he said · "It was I who took the liberty of sending for you, monsieur."

"Ah!" said the magistrate, who already knew as much about the Hôtel de Chalusse, and the events of the past twelve hours, as M. Casimir himself; for on his way to the house, he had turned Bourigeau inside out like a glove, by means of a dozen gentle questions.

"If monsieur wishes I will explain," resumed M. Casimir.

"Nothing! It is quite unnecessary. Usher us in."

This "us" astonished the valet; but before they reached the house it was explained to him. He discovered a man of flourishing and even jovial mien

who was walking along in the magistrate's shadow carrying a large, black portfolio under his arm. This was evidently the clerk. He seemed to be as pleased with his employment as he was with himself; and as he followed M. Casimir, he examined the adornments of the mansion, the mosaics in the vestibule, the statuary and the frescoed walls with an appraiser's eye. Perhaps he was calculating how many years' salary it would require to pay for the decorating of this one staircase.

On the threshold of the death room the magistrate paused. There had been some change during M. Casimir's absence. The doctor had left. The bed had been rearranged, and several candles were burning on a table covered with a white cloth. Madame Léon had gone to her own room accompanied by two servants, to fetch a vessel of holy water and a branch of withered palm. She was now engaged in repeating the prayers for the dead, pausing from time to time to dip the palm branch in the holy water, and sprinkle the bed. Both windows had been opened in spite of the cold. On the marble hearth stood a chafing-dish full of embers from which rose spiral rings of smoke, filling the room with a pungent odour as a servant poured some vinegar and sugar on to the coals.

As the magistrate appeared, every one rose up. Then, after bestowing prolonged scrutiny upon the room and its occupants, he respectfully removed his hat, and walked in. "Why are so many people here?" he inquired.

"I suggested that they should remain," replied M. Casimir, "because—"

"You are—suspicious," interrupted the magistrate.

His clerk had already drawn a pen and some paper from his portfolio, and was engaged in reading the decision, rendered by the magistrate at the request of one Bourigeau, and in virtue of which, seals were about to be affixed to the deceased nobleman's personal effects. Since the magistrate had entered the room, his eyes had not once wandered from Mademoiselle Marguerite, who was standing near the fire-place, looking pale but composed. At last he approached her, and in a tone of deep sympathy: "Are you Mademoiselle Marguerite?" he asked.

She raised her clear eyes, rendered more beautiful than ever, by the tears that trembled on her lashes, and in a faltering voice, replied: "Yes, monsieur."

"Are you a relative? Are you connected in any way with the Count de Chalusse? Have you any right to his property?"

"No, monsieur."

"Excuse me, mademoiselle, but these questions are indispensable. Who intrusted you to the care of M. de Chalusse, and by what right? Was it your father or your mother?"

"I have neither father nor mother, monsieur. I am alone in the world—utterly alone."

The magistrate glanced keenly round the room. "Ah! I understand," said he, at last; "advantage has been taken of your isolation to treat you with disrespect, to insult you, perhaps."

Every head drooped, and M. Casimir bitterly regretted that he had not remained below in the courtyard. Mademoiselle Marguerite looked at the magistrate in astonishment, for she was amazed by his penetration. She was ignorant of his conversation with Bourigeau on the road, and did not know that through the concierge's ridiculous statements and accusations, the magistrate had succeeded in discovering at least a portion of the truth.

"I shall have the honour of asking for a few moments' conversation with

you presently, mademoiselle," he said. "But first, one question. I am told that the Count de Chalusse entertained a very lively affection for you. Are you sure that he has not taken care to provide for your future? Are you sure that he has not left a will?"

The girl shook her head. "He made one in my favour some time ago," she replied. "I saw it; he gave it to me to read; but it was destroyed a fortnight after my arrival here, and in compliance with my request."

Madame Léon had hitherto been dumb with fear, but, conquering her weakness, she now decided to draw near and take part in the conversation. "How can you say that, my dear young lady?" she exclaimed. "You know that the count—God rest his soul!—was an extremely cautious man. I am certain that there is a will somewhere."

The magistrate's eyes were fixed on his ring. "It would be well to look, perhaps, before affixing the seals. You have a right to require this; so, if you wish—"

But she made no reply.

"Oh, yes!" insisted Madame Léon; "pray look, monsieur."

"But where should we be likely to find a will?"

"Certainly in this room—in this escritoire, or in one of the deceased count's cabinets."

The magistrate had learnt the story of the key from Bourigeau, but all the same he asked; "Where is the key to this escritoire?"

"Alas! monsieur," replied Mademoiselle Marguerite, "I broke it last night when M. de Chalusse was brought home unconscious. I hoped to avert what has, nevertheless, happened. Besides, I knew that his escritoire contained something over two millions in gold and bank notes."

Two millions—there! The occupants of the room stood aghast. Even the clerk was so startled that he let a blot fall upon his paper. Two millions! The magistrate was evidently reflecting. "Hum!" he murmured, meditatively. Then, as if deciding on his course, he exclaimed:

"Let a locksmith be sent for."

A servant went in search of one; and while they were waiting for his return, the magistrate sat down beside his clerk and talked to him in a low voice. At last the locksmith appeared, with his bag of tools hanging over his shoulder, and set to work at once. He found his task a difficult one. His pick-locks would not catch, and he was talking of filing the bolt, when, by chance, he found the joint, and the door flew open. But the escritoire was empty. There were only a few papers, and a bottle about three-quarters full of a crimson liquid on the shelf. Had M. de Chalusse rose and shook off his winding sheet, the consternation would not have been greater. The same instinctive fear thrilled the hearts of everybody present. An enormous fortune had disappeared. The same suspicions would rest upon them all. And each servant already saw himself arrested, imprisoned, and dragged before a law court.

However, anger speedily followed bewilderment, and a furious clamour arose. "A robbery has been committed!" cried the servants, in concert. "Mademoiselle had the key. It is wrong to suspect the innocent!"

Revolting as this exhibition was, it did not modify the magistrate's calmness. He had witnessed too many such scenes in the course of his carcer, and, at least, a score of times he had been compelled to interpose between children who had come to blows over their inheritance before their father's body was even cold. "Silence!" he commanded sternly. And as the tumult did not cease, as the servants continued to cry, "The thief must be

found. We shall have no difficulty in discovering the culprit," the magistrate exclaimed, still more imperiously: "Another word, and you all leave the room."

They were silenced; but there was a mute eloquence about their looks and gestures which it was impossible to misunderstand. Every eye was fixed upon Mademoiselle Marguerite with an almost ferocious expression. She knew it only too well; but, sublime in her energy, she stood, with her head proudly erect, facing the storm, and disdaining to answer these vile imputations. However she had a protector near by—the magistrate in person. "If this treasure has been diverted from the inheritance," said he, "the thief will be discovered and punished. But I wish to have one point explained—who said that Mademoiselle Marguerite had the key of the escritoire?"

"I did," replied a footman. "I was in the dining-room yesterday morning when the count gave it to her."

"For what purpose did he give it to her!"

"That she might obtain this vial—I recognised it at once. She brought it down to him."

"Did she return the key?"

"Yes; she gave it to him when she handed him the vial, and I saw him put it in his pocket."

The magistrate pointed to the bottle which was standing on the shelf. "Then the count himself must have put the vial back in its place," said he. "Further comment is unnecessary; for, if the money had then been missing, he could not have failed to discover the fact." No one had any reply to make to this quiet defence, which was, at the same time, a complete vindication. "And, besides," continued the magistrate, "who told you that this immense sum would be found here? Did you know it? Which one of you knew it?" And as nobody still ventured any remark, he added in an even more severe tone, and without seeming to notice Mademoiselle Marguerite's look of gratitude, "It is by no means a proof of honesty to be so extremely suspicious. Would it not have been easier to suppose that the deceased had placed the money somewhere else, and that it will yet be found?"

The clerk had been even less disturbed than the magistrate. He also was *blasé*, having witnessed too many of those frightful and shameless dramas which are enacted at a dead man's bedside, to be surprised at anything. If he had deigned to glance at the escritoire, it was only because he was curious to see how small a space would suffice to contain two millions; and then he had begun to calculate how many years he would be obliged to remain a clerk before he could succeed in amassing such a fabulous sum. However, hearing his superior express the intention of continuing the search for the will, and the missing treasure, he abruptly abandoned his calculation, and exclaimed, "Then, I suppose, I can commence my report, monsieur?"

"Yes," replied the magistrate, "write as follows:" And in a monotonous voice he began to dictate the prescribed formula, an unnecessary proceeding, for the clerk was quite as familiar with it as the magistrate himself:—"On the 16th of October, 186—, at nine o'clock in the morning, in compliance with the request of the servants of the deceased Louis-Henri-Raymond de Durtal, Count de Chalusse, and in the interest of his presumptive heirs, and all others connected with him, and in accordance with the requirements of clauses 819 (Code Napoléon) and 909 (Code of Procedure),

we, justice of the peace, accompanied by our clerk, visited the residence of the deceased aforesaid, in the Rue de Courcelles, where, having entered a bedroom opening on to the courtyard, and lighted by two windows looking towards the south, we found the body of the deceased aforesaid, lying on his bed, and covered with a sheet. In this room were—" He paused in his dictation, and addressing the clerk, "Take down the name of all present," said he. "That will require some little time, and, meanwhile, I will continue my search."

They had, in fact, only examined the shelf of the escritoire, and the drawers were still to be inspected. In the first which he opened, the magistrate found ample proofs of the accuracy of the information which had been furnished him by Mademoiselle Marguerite. The drawer contained a memorandum which established the fact that the Crédit Foncier had lent M. de Chalusse the sum of eight hundred and fifty thousand francs, which had been remitted to him on the Saturday preceding his death. Beside this document lay a second memorandum, signed by a stockbroker named Pell, setting forth that the latter had sold for the count securities of various descriptions to the amount of fourteen hundred and twenty-three thousand francs, which sum had been paid to the count on the preceding Tuesday, partly in bank-notes and partly in gold. It was thus evident that M. de Chalusse had received a grand total of two million two hundred and seventy-three thousand francs within the past six days.

In the drawer which was next opened, the magistrate only found a number of deeds, bonds, leases, and mortgages; but they proved that public rumour, far from exaggerating the figures of the count's fortune, had diminished it, and this made it difficult to explain why he had contracted a loan. The third and last drawer contained twenty-eight thousand francs, in packages of twenty franc pieces. Finally, in a small casket, the magistrate found a packet of letters, yellow with age and bound together with a broad piece of blue velvet; as well as three or four withered bouquets, and a woman's glove, which had been worn by a hand of marvellous smallness. These were evidently the relics of some great passion of many years before; and the magistrate looked at them for a moment with a sigh.

His own interest prevented him from noticing Mademoiselle Marguerite's agitation. She had almost fainted on perceiving these souvenirs of the count's past life so suddenly exhumed. However, the examination of the escritoire being over, and the clerk having completed his task of recording the names of all the servants, the magistrate said, in a loud voice, "I shall now proceed to affix the seals; but, before doing so, I shall take a portion of the money found in this desk, and set it apart for the expenses of the household, in accordance with the law. Who will take charge of this money?"

"Oh, not I!" exclaimed Madame Léon.

"I will take charge of it," said M. Casimir.

"Then here are eight thousand francs, for which you will be held acountable.'

M. Casimir being a prudent man, counted the money himself, and after doing so, "Who will attend to the count's obsequies?" he inquired.

"You, and without loss of time."

Proud of his new importance, the valet hastily left the room, his self-complacency increased by the thought that he was to breakfast with M. Isidore Fortunat, and would afterwards share a fat commission with Victor Chupin.

However, the magistrate had already resumed his dictation: "And at this moment we have affixed bands of white tape, sealed at either end with

red wax, bearing the impress of our seal as justice of the peace, to wit: *In the aforesaid chamber of the deceased: First,* A band of tape, covering the key-hole of the lock of the escritoire, which had been previously opened by a locksmith summoned by us, and closed again by the said locksmith—" And so the magistrate and his clerk went from one piece of furniture to another, duly specifying in the report each instance in which the seals were affixed.

From the count's bedroom they passed into his study, followed by Mademoiselle Marguerite, Madame Léon, and the servants. By noon every article of furniture in which M. de Chalusse would have been likely to deposit his valuables or a will, had been searched, and nothing, absolutely nothing, had been found. The magistrate had pursued his investigation with the feverish energy which the most self-possessed of men are apt to display under such circumstances, especially when influenced by the conviction that the object they are seeking is somewhere within their reach, perhaps under their very hand. Indeed, he was persuaded—he was sure—he would, in fact, have sworn that the Count de Chalusse had taken all the precautions natural in childless men, who have no near relatives to inherit their fortune, or who have placed their interest and affections beyond their family circle. And when he was obliged to abandon his search, his gesture indicated anger rather than discouragement; for apparent evidence had not shaken his conviction in the least. So he stood motionless, with his eyes riveted on his ring, as if waiting some miraculous inspiration from it. "For the count's only fault, I am sure, was in being too cautious," he muttered. "This is frequently the case, and it would be quite in keeping with the character of this man, judging from what I know of him."

Madame Léon lifted her hands to heaven. "Ah, yes! such was, indeed, his nature," she remarked, approvingly. "Never, no, never, have I seen such a suspicious and distrustful person as he was. Not in reference to money—no, indeed—for he left that lying about everywhere; but about his papers. He locked them up with the greatest care, as if he feared that some terrible secret might evaporate from them. It was a mania with him. If he had a letter to write, he barricaded his door, as if he were about to commit some horrible crime. More than once have I seen him—' The words died away on her lips, and she remained motionless and abashed, like a person who has just escaped some great peril. One word more, and involuntarily, without even knowing it, she would have confessed her besetting sin, which was listening at, and peering through, the keyholes of the doors that were closed against her. Still, she deluded herself with the belief that this slight indiscretion of her over-ready tongue had escaped the magistrate's notice.

He certainly did not seem to be conscious of it, for he was giving his attention entirely to Mademoiselle Marguerite, who seemed to have regained the cold reserve and melancholy resignation habitual to her. "You see, mademoiselle," he remarked, "that I have done all that is in my power to do. We must now leave the search to chance, and to the person who takes the inventory. Who knows what surprise may be in store for us in this immense house, of which we have only explored three rooms?"

She shook her head gently and replied: "I can never be sufficiently grateful for your kindness, monsieur, and for the great service you rendered me in crushing that infamous accusation. As regards the rest, I have never expected anything—I do not expect anything now."

She believed what she said, and her tone of voice proved this so unmistakably that the magistrate was surprised and somewhat disturbed. "Come, come, my young lady," he said, with almost paternal kindness of manner, "you ought not to despond. Still, you must have certain reasons for speaking as you do; and as I am free for an hour, we are going to have a plain talk, as if we were father and daughter."

On hearing these words, the clerk rose with a cloud on his jovial face. He impatiently jingled his bunch of keys; for as the seals are successively affixed, each key is confided to the clerk, to remain in his hands until the seals are removed.

"I understand," said the magistrate. "Your stomach, which is more exacting in its demands than mine, is not satisfied with a cup of chocolate till dinner-time. So, go and get your lunch; on your return, you will find me here. You may now conclude the report, and request these parties to sign it."

Urged on by hunger, the clerk hastily mumbled over the remainder of the formula, called all the names that he had inserted in the report, and each of the servants advanced in turn, signed his or her name, or made a cross, and then retired. Madame Léon read in the judge's face that she also was expected to withdraw; and she was reluctantly leaving the room, when Mademoiselle Marguerite detained her to ask: "Are you quite sure that nothing has come for me to-day?"

"Nothing, mademoiselle; I went in person to inquire of the concierge."

"Did you post my letter last night?"

"Oh! my dear young lady, can you doubt it?"

The young girl stifled a sigh, and then, with a gesture of dismissal, she remarked, "M. de Fondège must be sent for."

"The General?"

"Yes."

"I will send for him at once," replied the housekeeper; and thereupon she left the room, closing the door behind her with a vicious slam.

VIII.

The justice of the peace and Mademoiselle Marguerite were at last alone in M. de Chalusse's study. This room, which the count had preferred above all others, was a spacious, magnificent, but rather gloomy apartment, with lofty walls and dark, richly carved furniture. Its present aspect was more than ever solemn and lugubrious, for it gave one a chill to see the bands of white tape affixed to the locks of the cabinets and bookcases. When the magistrate had installed himself in the count's arm-chair, and the girl had taken a seat near him, they remained looking at each other in silence for a few moments. The magistrate was asking himself how he should begin. Having fathomed Mademoiselle Marguerite's extreme sensitiveness and reserve, he said to himself that if he offended or alarmed her, she would refuse him her confidence, in which case he would be powerless to serve her as he wished to do. He had, in fact, an almost passionate desire to be of service to her, feeling himself drawn towards her by an inexplicable feeling of sympathy, in which esteem, respect, and admiration alike were blended, though he had only known her for a few hours. Still, he must make a beginning. "Mademoiselle," he said, at last, "I abstained from questioning you before the servants—and if I take the liberty of doing so

now, it is not, believe me, out of any idle curiosity; moreover, you are not compelled to answer me....But you are young—and I am an old man; and it is my duty—even if my heart did not urge me to do so—to offer you the aid of my experience—"

"Speak, monsieur," interrupted Marguerite. "I will answer your questions frankly, or else not answer them at all."

"To resume, then," said he, "I am told that M. de Chalusse has no relatives near or remote. Is this the truth?"

"So far as I know—yes, monsieur. Still, I have heard it said that a sister of his, Mademoiselle Hermine de Chalusse, abandoned her home twenty-five or thirty years ago, when she was about my age, and that she has never received her share of the enormous fortune left by her parents."

"And has this sister never given any sign of life?"

"Never! Still, monsieur, I have promised you to be perfectly frank. That letter which the Count de Chalusse received yesterday, that letter which I regard as the cause of his death—well, I have a presentiment that it came from his sister. It could only have been written by her or—by that other person whose letters—and souvenirs—you found in the escritoire."

"And—this other person—who can she be?" As the young girl made no reply, the magistrate did not insist, but continued: "And you, my child, who are you?"

She made a gesture of sorrowful resignation, and then, in a voice faltering with emotion, she answered: "I do not know, monsieur. Perhaps I am the count's daughter. I should be telling an untruth if I said that was not my belief. Yes, I believe it, but I have never been certain of it. Sometimes I have believed, sometimes I have doubted it. On certain days I have said to myself, 'Yes, it must be so!' and I have longed to throw my arms around his neck. But at other times I have exclaimed: 'No, it isn't possible!' and I have almost hated him. Besides, he never said a word on the subject—never a decisive word, at least. When I saw him for the first time, six years ago, I judged by the manner in which he forbade me to call him 'father,' that he would never answer any question I might ask on the subject."

If there was a man in the world inaccessible to idle curiosity, it was certainly this magistrate, whose profession condemned him to listen every day to family grievances, neighbourly quarrels, complaints, accusations, and slander. And yet as he listened to Mademoiselle Marguerite, he experienced that strange disquietude which siezes hold of a person when a puzzling problem is presented. "Allow me to believe that many decisive proofs may have escaped your notice on account of your inexperience," he said.

But interrupting him with a gesture, she sadly remarked: "You are mistaken; I am not inexperienced."

He could not help smiling at what he considered her self-conceit. "Poor child!" said he, "how old are you? Eighteen?"

She shook her head. "Yes, by my certificate of birth I am only eighteen; but by the sufferings I have endured I am, perhaps, older than you are, monsieur, despite your white hair. Those who have lived such a life as I have, are never young; they are old in suffering, even in their childhood. And if by experience you mean lack of confidence, a knowledge of good and evil, distrust of everything and everybody, mine, young girl though I be, will no doubt equal yours." She paused, hesitated for a moment, and then

continued: "But why should I wait for you to question me? It is neither sincere nor dignified on my part to do so. The person who claims counsel owes absolute frankness to his adviser. I will speak to you as if I were communing with my own soul. I will tell you what no person has ever known—no one, not even Pascal. And believe me, my past life was full of bitter misery, although you find me here in this splendid house. But I have nothing to conceal; and if I have cause to blush, it is for others, not for myself."

Perhaps she was impelled by an irresistible desire to relieve her overburdened heart, after long years of self-restraint; perhaps she no longer felt sure of herself, and desired some other advice than the dictates of her conscience, in presence of the calamity which had befallen her. At all events, too much engrossed in her own thoughts to heed the magistrate's surprise, or hear the words he faltered, she rose from her seat, and, with her hands pressed tightly on her throbbing brow, she began to tell the story of her life.

"My first recollections," she said, "are of a narrow, cheerless courtyard, surrounded by grim and massive walls, so high that I could scarcely see the top of them. At noontime in summer the sun visited one little corner, where there was a stone bench; but in winter it never showed itself at all. There were five or six small scrubby trees, with moss-grown trunks and feeble branches, which put forth a few yellow leaves at spring-time. We were some thirty children who assembled in this courtyard—children from five to eight years old, all clad alike in brown dresses, with a little blue handkerchief tied about our shoulders. We all wore blue caps on week-days, and white ones on Sundays, with woollen stockings, thick shoes, and a black ribbon, with a large metal cross dangling from our necks. Among us moved the good sisters, silent and sad, with their hands crossed in their large sleeves, their faces as white as their snowy caps, and their long strings of beads, set off with numerous copper medals, clanking when they walked like prisoners' chains. As a rule, each face wore the same expression of resignation, unvarying gentleness, and inexhaustible patience. But there were some who wore it only as one wears a mask—some whose eyes gleamed at times with passion, and who vented their cold, bitter anger upon us defenceless children. However, there was one sister, still young and very fair, whose manner was so gentle and so sad that even I, with my mere infantile intelligence, felt that she must have some terrible sorrow. During play-time she often took me on her knee and embraced me with convulsive tenderness, murmuring: "Dear little one! darling little one!" Sometimes her endearments were irksome to me, but I never allowed her to see it, for fear of making her still more sad; and in my heart I was content and proud to suffer for and with her. Poor sister! I owe her the only happy hours of my infancy. She was called Sister Calliste. I do not know what has become of her, but often, when my heart fails me, I think of her, and even now I cannot mention her name without tears."

Mademoiselle Marguerite was indeed weeping—big tears which she made no attempt to conceal were coursing down her cheeks. It cost her a great effort to continue: "You have already understood, monsieur, what I myself did not know for several years. I was in a foundling asylum, and I was a foundling myself. I cannot say that we lacked anything; and I should be ungrateful if I did not say and feel that these good sisters were charity personified. But, alas! their hearts had only a certain amount of tenderness to distribute between thirty poor little girls, and so each child's

portion was small; the caresses were the same for all, and I longed to be loved differently, to have kind words and caresses for myself alone. We slept in little white beds with snowy curtains, in a clean, well-ventilated dormitory, in the centre of which stood a statue of the Virgin, who seemed to smile on us all alike. In winter we had a fire. Our clothes were warm and neat; our food was excellent. We were taught to read and write, to sew and embroider. There was a recreation hour between all the exercises. Those who were studious and good were rewarded; and twice a week we were taken into the country for a long walk. It was during one of these excursions that I learned from the talk of the passers-by, what we were, and what we were called. Sometimes, in the afternoon, we were visited by elegantly-attired ladies, who were accompanied by their own children, radiant with health and happiness. The good sisters told us that these were 'pious ladies,' or 'charitable ladies,' whom we must love and respect, and whom we must never forget to mention in our prayers. They always brought us toys and cakes. Sometimes the establishment was visited by priests and grave old gentlemen, whose sternness of manner alarmed us. They peered into every nook and corner, asked questions about everything, assured themselves that everything was in its place, and some of them even tasted our soup. They were always satisfied; and the lady superior led them through the building, and bowed to them, exclaiming: 'We love them so much, the poor little dears!' And the gentlemen replied: 'Yes, yes, my dear sister, they are very fortunate.' And the gentlemen were right. Poor labourers' children are often obliged to endure privations which we knew nothing of. They are often obliged to make their supper off a piece of dry bread—but, then, the crust is given them by their mother, with a kiss."

The magistrate, who was extremely ill at ease, had not yet succeeded in finding a syllable to offer in reply. Indeed, Mademoiselle Marguerite had not given him an opportunity to speak, so rapidly had this long repressed flood of recollections poured from her lips. When she spoke the word "mother," the magistrate fancied she would show some sign of emotion.

But he was mistaken. On the contrary, her voice became harsher, and a flash of anger, as it were, darted from her eyes.

"I suffered exceedingly in that asylum," she resumed. "Sister Calliste left the establishment, and all the surroundings chilled and repelled me. My only few hours of happiness were on Sundays, when we attended church. As the great organ pealed, and as I watched the priests officiating at the altar in their gorgeous vestments, I forgot my own sorrows. It seemed to me that I was ascending on the clouds of incense to the celestial sphere which the sisters so often talked to us about, and where they said each little girl would find her mother."

Mademoiselle Marguerite hesitated for an instant, as if she were somewhat unwilling to give utterance to her thoughts; but at last, forcing herself to continue, she said: "Yes, I suffered exceedingly in that foundling asylum. Almost all my little companions were spiteful, unattractive in person, sallow, thin, and afflicted with all kinds of diseases, as if they were not unfortunate enough in being abandoned by their parents. And —to my shame, monsieur, I must confess it—these unfortunate little beings inspired me with unconquerable repugnance, with disgust bordering on aversion. I would rather have pressed my lips to a red-hot iron than to the forehead of one of these children. I did not reason on the subject, alas! I was only eight or nine years old; but I felt this antipathy in every

fibre of my being. The others knew it too; and, in revenge, they ironically styled me 'the lady,' and left me severely alone. But sometimes, during playtime, when the good sisters' backs were turned, the children attacked me, beat me, and scratched my face and tore my clothes. I endured these onslaughts uncomplainingly, for I was conscious that I deserved them. But how many reprimands my torn clothes cost me! How many times I received only a dry crust for my supper, after being soundly scolded and called 'little careless.' But as I was quiet, studious, and industrious, a quicker learner than the majority of my companions, the sisters were fond of me. They said that I was a promising girl, and that they would have no difficulty in finding me a nice home with some of the rich and pious ladies who have a share in managing institutions of this kind. The only fault the sisters found with me was that I was sullen. But such was not really the case; I was only sad and resigned. Everything around me so depressed and saddened me that I withdrew into myself, and buried all my thoughts and aspirations deep in my heart. If I had naturally been a bad child, I scarcely know what would have been the result of this. I have often asked myself the question in all sincerity, but I have been unable to reply, for one cannot be an impartial judge respecting oneself. However, this much is certain, although childhood generally leaves a train of pleasant recollections in a young girl's life, mine was only fraught with torture and misery, desperate struggles, and humiliation. I was unwilling to be confirmed because I did not wish to wear a certain dress which a 'benevolent lady' had presented for the use of the asylum, and which had belonged to a little girl of my own age who had died of consumption. The thought of arraying myself in this dress to approach the holy table frightened and revolted me as much as if I had been sentenced to drape myself in a winding-sheet. And yet it was the prettiest dress of all—white muslin beautifully embroidered. It had been ardently coveted by the other children, and had been given to me as a sort of reward of merit. And I dared not explain the cause of my unconquerable repugnance. Who would have understood me? I should only have been accused of undue sensitiveness and pride, absurd in one of my humble position. I was then only twelve years old; but no one knew the struggle in my mind save the old priest, my confessor. I could confess everything to him; he understood me, and did not reproach me. Still he answered: 'You must wear this dress, my child, for your pride must be broken. Go—I shall impose no other penance on you.' I obeyed him, full of superstitious terror; for it seemed to me that this was a frightful omen which would bring me misfortune, my whole life through. And I was confirmed in the dead girl's embroidered dress."

During the five-and-twenty years that he had held the position of justice of the peace, the magistrate had listened to many confessions, wrung from wretched souls by stern necessity, or sorrow, but never had his heart been moved as it now was, by this narrative, told with such uncomplaining anguish, and in a tone of such sincerity. However she resumed her story. "The confirmation over, our life became as gloomily monotonous as before; we read the same pious books and did the same work at the same hours as formerly. It seemed to me that I was stifling in this atmosphere. I gasped for breath, and thought that anything would be preferable to this semblance of existence, which was not real life. I was thinking of applying for the 'good situation,' which had so often been mentioned to me, when one morning I was summoned into the steward's office—a mysterious and fright-

ful place to us children. He himself was a stout dirty man, wearing large blue spectacles and a black silk skull-cap; and from morning until night, summer and winter, he sat writing at a desk behind a little grating, hung with green curtains. Round the room were ranged the registers, in which our names were recorded and our appearances described, together with the boxes containing the articles found upon us, which were carefully preserved to assist in identifying us should occasion arise. I entered this office with a throbbing heart. In addition to the stout gentleman and the Lady Superior, I found there a thin, wiry man, with cunning eyes, and a portly woman, with a coarse but rather good-natured face. The superior at once informed me that I was in the presence of M. and Madame Greloux, book-binders, who had come to the asylum in search of two apprentices, and she asked me if I should like to be one of them. Ah! monsieur, it seemed to me that heaven had opened before me and I boldly replied: 'Yes.' The gentleman in the black silk skull-cap immediately emerged from his place behind the grating to explain my obligations and duties to me at length, especially insisting upon the point, that I ought to be grateful—I, a miserable foundling, reared by public charity—for the generosity which this good gentleman and lady showed in offering to take charge of me and employ me in their work-shop. I must confess that I could not clearly realise in what this great generosity which he so highly praised consisted, nor did I perceive any reason why I should be particularly grateful. Still, to all the conditions imposed upon me, I answered, 'Yes, yes, yes!' so heartily that Madame Greloux seemed greatly pleased. 'It is evident that the child will be glad to get away,' she said to herself. Then the superior began to enumerate the obligations my employers would incur, repeating again and again that I was one of the very best girls in the asylum—pious, obedient, and industrious, reading and writing to perfection, and knowing how to sew and embroider as only those who are taught in such institutions can. She made Madame Greloux promise to watch over me as she would have watched over her own daughter; never to leave me alone; to take me to church, and allow me an occasional Sunday afternoon, so that I might pay a visit to the asylum. The gentleman with the spectacles and the skull-cap then reminded the book-binder of the duties of an employer towards his apprentices, and turning to a bookcase behind him, he even took down a large volume from which he read extract after extract, which I listened to without understanding a word, though I was quite sure that the book was written in French. At last, when the man and his wife had said 'Amen' to everything, the gentleman with the spectacles drew up a document which we all signed in turn. I belonged to a master?"

She paused. Here her childhood ended. But almost immediately she resumed: "My recollections of these people are not altogether unpleasant. They were harassed and wearied by their efforts to support their son in a style of living far above their position; but, despite their sacrifices, their son had no affection for them, and on this account I pitied them. However, not only was the husband gloomy and quick-tempered, but his wife also was subject to fits of passion, so that the apprentices often had a hard time of it. Still, between Madame Greloux's tempests of wrath there were occasional gleams of sunshine. After beating us for nothing, she would exclaim, with quite as little reason, 'Come and kiss me, and don't pout any more. Here are four sous; go and buy yourself some cakes.'"

The justice started in his arm-chair. Was it, indeed, Mademoiselle Marguerite who was speaking, the proud young girl with a queen-like bear-

ing, whose voice rang out like crystal? Was it she indeed, who imitated the harsh, coarse dialect of the lower classes with such accuracy of intonation. Ah! at that moment, as her past life rose so vividly before her, it seemed to her as if she were still in the years gone by, and she fancied she could still hear the voice of the book-binder's wife.

She did not even notice the magistrate's astonishment. "I had left the asylum," she continued, "and that was everything to me. I felt that a new and different life was beginning, and that was enough. I flattered myself that I might win a more earnest and sincere affection among these honest, industrious toilers, than I had found in the asylum; and to win it and deserve it, I neglected nothing that good-will could suggest, or strength allow. My patrons no doubt fathomed my desire, and naturally enough, perhaps unconsciously, they took advantage of my wish to please. I can scarcely blame them. I had entered their home under certain conditions in view of learning a profession; they gradually made me their servant—it was praiseworthy economy on their part. What I had at first done of my own free-will and from a wish to please, at last became my daily task, which I was rigidly required to fulfil. Compelled to rise long before any one else in the house, I was expected to have everything in order by the time the others made their appearance with their eyes still heavy with sleep. It is true that my benefactors rewarded me after their fashion. On Sundays they took me with them on their excursions into the country, so as to give me a rest, they said, after the week's work. And I followed them along the dusty highways in the hot sunshine, panting, perspiring, and tottering under the weight of a heavy basket of provisions, which were eaten on the grass or in the woods, and the remnants of which fell to me. Madame Greloux's brother generally accompanied us; and his name would have lingered in my memory, even if it had not been a peculiar one. He was called Vantrasson. He was a tall robust man, with eyes that made me tremble whenever he fixed them upon me. He was a soldier; intensely proud of his uniform; a great talker, and enchanted with himself. He evidently thought himself irresistible. It was from that man's mouth that I heard the first coarse word at which my unsophisticated heart took offence. It was not to be the last one. He finally told me that he had taken a fancy to me, and I was obliged to complain to Madame Greloux of her brother's persecutions. But she only laughed at me, and said: 'Nonsense! He's merely talking to hear himself talk.' Yes, that was her answer. And yet she was an honest woman, a devoted wife, and a fond mother. Ah! if she had had a daughter. But with a poor apprentice, who has neither father nor mother, one need not be over fastidious. She had made a great many promises to the lady superior, but she fancied that the utterance of a few commonplace words of warning relieved her of all further obligations. 'And so much the worse for those who allow themselves to be fooled,' she always added in conclusion.

"Fortunately, my pride, which I had so often been reproached with, shielded me. My condition might be humble, but my spirit was lofty. It was a blessing from God, this pride of mine, for it saved me from temptation, while so many fell around me. I slept, with the other apprentices, in the attic, where we were entirely beyond the control of those who should have been our guardians. That is to say, when the day's toil was over, and the workshop closed, we were free—abandoned to our own instincts, and the most pernicious influences. And neither evil advice nor bad example was wanting. The women employed in the bindery in nowise

restrained themselves in our presence, and we heard them tell marvellous stories that dazzled many a poor girl. They did not talk as they did from any evil design, or out of a spirit of calculation, but from pure thoughtlessness, and because they were quite devoid of moral sense. And they never tired of telling us of the pleasures of life, of fine dinners at restaurants, gay excursions to Joinville-le-Pont, and masked balls at Montparnasse or the Elysée Montmartre. Ah! experience is quickly gained in these workshops. Sometimes those who went off at night with ragged dresses and worn-out shoes, returned the next morning in superb toilettes to say that they resigned their situations, as they were not made for work, and intended to live like ladies. They departed radiant, but often before a month was over they came back, emaciated, hollow-eyed, and despairing, and humbly begged for a little work."

She paused, so crushed by the weight of these sad memories as to lose consciousness of the present. And the judge also remained silent, not daring to question her. And, besides, what good would it do? What could she tell him about these poor little apprentices that he did not know already? If he was surprised at anything, it was that this beautiful young girl, who had been left alone and defenceless, had possessed sufficient strength of character to escape the horrible dangers that threatened her.

However, it was not long before Mademoiselle Marguerite shook off the torpor which had stolen over her. "I ought not to boast of my strength, sir," she resumed. "Besides my pride, I had a hope to sustain me—a hope which I clung to with the tenacity of despair. I wished to become expert at my profession, for I had learned that skilled workers were always in demand, and could always command good wages. So when my household duties were over, I still found time to learn the business, and made such rapid progress that I astonished even my employer. I knew that I should soon be able to make five or six francs a day; and this prospect was pleasant enough to make me forget the present, well-nigh intolerable as it sometimes was. During the last winter that I spent with my employers, their orders were so numerous and pressing that they worked on Sundays as well as on week days, and it was with difficulty that I obtained an hour twice a month to pay a visit to the good sisters who had cared for me in my childhood. I had never failed in this duty, and indeed it had now become my only pleasure. My employer's conscience compelled him to pay me a trifle occasionally for the additional toil he imposed upon me, and the few francs I thus received, I carried to the poor children at the asylum. After living all my life on public charity, I was able to give in my turn; and this thought gratified my pride, and increased my importance in my own eyes. I was nearly fifteen, and my term of apprenticeship had almost expired, when one bright day in March, I saw one of the lay sisters of the asylum enter the workroom. She was in a flutter of excitement; her face was crimson, and she was so breathless from her hurried ascent of the stairs that she gasped rather than said to me: 'Quick! come—follow me! Some one is waiting for you!' 'Who!—where?'—'Make haste! Ah! my dear child, if you only knew—' I hesitated; but Madame Greloux pushed me towards the door exclaiming: 'Be off, you little stupid!' I followed the sister without thinking of changing my dress—without even removing the kitchen apron I wore. Downstairs, at the front door, stood the most magnificent carriage I had ever seen in my life. Its rich silk cushions were so beautiful that I scarcely dared to enter it; and I was all the more intimidated by a footman in gorgeous livery,

who respectfully opened the door at our approach. 'You must get into the carriage,' said the sister; 'it was sent for you.' I obeyed her, and before I had recovered from my astonishment we had reached the asylum, and I was ushered into the office where the contract which bound me as an apprentice had been signed. As soon as I entered, the superior took me by the hand and led me towards a gentleman who was sitting near the window. 'Marguerite,' said she, 'salute Monsieur le Comte de Chalusse.'"

IX.

For some little time there had been a noise of footsteps and a subdued murmur of voices in the vestibule. Annoyed by this interruption, although he perfectly understood its cause, the magistrate rose and hastily opened the door. He was not mistaken. His clerk had returned from lunch, and the time of waiting seemed extremely long to him. "Ah! it's you," said the magistrate. "Very well! begin your inventory. It won't be long before I join you." And closing the door he resumed his seat again. Mademoiselle Marguerite was so absorbed in her narrative that she scarcely noticed this incident, and he had not seated himself before she resumed. "In all my life, I had never seen such an imposing looking person as the Count de Chalusse. His manner, attire, and features could not fail to inspire a child like me with fear and respect. I was so awed that I had scarcely enough presence of mind to bow to him. He glanced at me coldly, and exclaimed: 'Ah! is this the young girl you were speaking of?' The count's tone betrayed such disagreeable surprise that the superior was dismayed. She looked at me, and seemed indignant at my more than modest attire. 'It's a shame to allow a child to leave home dressed in this fashion,' she angrily exclaimed. And she almost tore my huge apron off me, and then with her own hands began to arrange my hair as if to display me to better advantage. 'Ah! these employers,' she exclaimed, 'the best of them are bad. How they do deceive you. It's impossible to place any confidence in their promises. Still, one can't always be at their heels.'

"But the superior's efforts were wasted, for M. de Chalusse had turned away and had begun talking with some gentlemen near by. For the office was full that morning. Five or six gentlemen, whom I recognised as the directors of the asylum, were standing round the steward in the black skull cap. They were evidently talking about me. I was certain of this by the glances they gave me, glances which, however, were full of kindness. The superior joined the group and began speaking with unusual vivacity, while standing in the recess of a window, I listened with all my might. But I must have over-estimated my intelligence, for I could gain no meaning whatever from the phrases which followed each other in rapid succession; though the words 'adoption,' 'emancipation,' 'dowry,' 'compensation,' 'reimbursement for sums expended,' recurred again and again. I was only certain of one point: the Count de Chalusse wished something, and these gentlemen were specifying other things in exchange. To each of their demands he answered: 'Yes, yes—it's granted. That's understood.' But at last he began to grow impatient, and in a voice which impressed one with the idea that he was accustomed to command, he exclaimed, 'I will do whatever you wish. Do you desire anything more?' The gentlemen at once became silent, and the

superior hastily declared that M. de Chalusse was a thousand times too good, but that one could expect no less of him, the last representative of one of the greatest and oldest families of France.

"I cannot describe the surprise and indignation that were raging in my soul. I divined—I felt that it was *my* fate, *my* future, *my* life that were being decided, and I was not even consulted on the matter. They were disposing of me as if they were sure in advance of my consent. My pride revolted at the thought, but I could not find a word to say in protest. Crimson with shame, confused and furious, I was wondering how I could interfere, when suddenly the consultation ceased and the gentlemen at once surrounded me. One of them, a little old man with a vapid smile and twinkling eyes, tapped me on the cheek, and said: 'So she is as good as she is pretty!' I could have struck him; but all the others laughed approvingly, with the exception of M. de Chalusse, whose manner became more and more frigid, and whose lips wore a constrained smile, as if he had resolved to keep his temper despite all provocation. It seemed to me that he was suffering terribly, and I afterwards learned that I had not been mistaken. Far from imitating the old gentleman's familiar manner, he bowed to me very gravely, with an air of deference that quite abashed me, and went away after saying that he would return the next day to conclude the arrangements.

"I was at last left alone with the superior, whom I longed to question, but she gave me no time to do so, for with extreme volubility she began to tell me of my surprising good fortune, which was an unanswerable and conclusive proof of the kindness and protection of Providence. 'The count,' she said, 'was to become my guardian. He would certainly give me a dowry; and by-and-by, if I were grateful to him for his goodness, he would adopt me, a poor fatherless and motherless girl, and I should bear the great name of Durtal de Chalusse, and inherit an immense fortune.' In conclusion, she said that there was no limit to the count's generosity, that he had consented to reimburse the asylum the money that had been spent on me, that he had offered to dower, I do not know how many poor girls, and that he had promised to build a chapel for the use of the establishment. This was all true, incredible as it might seem. That very morning, M. de Chalusse had called at the asylum, declared that he was old and childless, a bachelor without any near relatives, and that he wished to adopt a poor orphan. They had given him a list of all the children in the institution, and he had chosen me. 'A mere chance, my dear Marguerite,' repeated the superior. 'A mere chance—or rather a true miracle.' It did, indeed, seem a miracle, but I was more surprised than elated. I longed to be alone, so as to deliberate and reflect, for I knew that I was free to accept or decline this dazzling offer.

"I timidly asked permission to return to my employers to inform them of what had happened and consult with them; but my request was refused. The superior told me that I must deliberate and decide alone; and that when once my decision was taken, there could be no change. So I remained at the asylum, and dined at the superior's table; and during the night I occupied the room of a sister who was absent. What surprised me most of all was the deference with which I was treated. The sisters all seemed to consider me a person of great importance. And yet I hesitated.

"My indecision may seem absurd and hypocritical; but it was really sincere. My present situation was certainly by no means an enviable one. But the worst was over; my term as an apprentice had nearly expired, and

my future seemed assured. My future! What could it be with the Count de Chalusse? It was painted in such brilliant colours that it frightened me. Why had the count chosen me in preference to any of the other girls? Was it really chance which had decided him in his choice? On reflecting, the miracle seemed to me to have been prepared in advance, and I fancied that it must conceal some mystery. More than this, the thought of yielding myself up to a stranger terrified me. Forty-eight hours had been granted me to consider my decision, and till the very last instant I remained in doubt. Who knows? Perhaps it would have been better for me if I had returned to my humble life. At all events, I should have been spared a great deal of sorrow and humiliation. But I lacked the courage; and when the time expired, I consented to the new arrangement.

"Should I live a thousand years I shall never forget the day I left the foundling asylum to become the Count de Chalusse's ward. It was a Saturday, and I had given my answer to the superior on the evening before. The next morning I received a visit from my former employers, who, having been informed of the great change in my prospects, had come to bid me good-bye. The cancelling of my apprenticeship had at first caused some trouble, but eventually the count's gold silenced their objections. Still, they were sorry to part with me, as I plainly saw. Their eyes were moist with tears. They were sorry to lose the poor little servant who had served them so faithfully. At the same time, however, I noticed evident constraint in their manner. They no longer said 'thee' and 'thou' to me; they no longer spoke roughly; but they said 'you,' and addressed me as 'mademoiselle.' Poor people! they awkwardly apologized for having ventured to accept my services, declaring in the same breath that they should never be able to replace me at the same price. Madame Greloux, moreover, declared that she should never forgive herself for not having sharply reproved her brother for his abominable conduct. He was a good-for-nothing fellow, she said, as was proved by the fact that he had dared to raise his eyes to me. For the first time in my life, I felt that I was sincerely loved; and I was so deeply touched that if my decision had not been written and signed, I should certainly have returned to live with these worthy people. But it was too late. A sister came to tell me that the superior wished to see me. I bade Father and Mother Greloux farewell and went down-stairs.

"In the superior's room, a lady and two shop-girls, laden with boxes and parcels, were waiting for me. It was a dressmaker who had come with some clothes suited to my new station in life. I was told that she had been sent by the Count de Chalusse. This great nobleman thought of everything; and, although he had thirty servants to do his bidding, he never disdained to occupy himself with the pettiest details. So, for the first time, I was arrayed in rustling silk and clinging cashmere. My toilette was no trifling affair. All the good sisters clustered round me, and tried to beautify me with the same care and patience as they would have displayed in adorning the Virgin's statue for a fête-day. A secret instinct warned me that they were over-doing the matter, and that they were making me look ridiculous; but I did not mind. I allowed them to please themselves. I could still feel Madame Greloux's tears on my hand, and the scene seemed to me as lugubrious as the last toilette of a prisoner under sentence of death. When they had completed their task, I heard a buzz of admiration round me. If the sisters were worthy of belief, they had never seen such a wonderful transformation. Those who were in the class-rooms or the

sewing-room, were summoned to view and admire me, and some of the elder children were also admitted. Perhaps I was intended as an example for the latter, for I heard the lady superior say to them, 'You see, my dear children, the result of good behaviour. Be diligent and dutiful, like our dear Marguerite, and God will reward you as He has rewarded her.' And, meantime, miserable in my finery, I waited—waited for M. de Chalusse, who was coming to take me away.

"At the appointed hour he appeared, with the same air of haughty reserve, that had so awed me on the occasion of our first meeting. He scarcely deigned to look at me, and although I watched him with poignant anxiety, I could read neither blame nor approval on his face. 'You see that your wishes have been scrupulously obeyed, Monsieur le Cómte,' said the superior. 'I thank you,' he replied; 'and I shall prove the extent of my gratitude to the poor children under your charge.' Then, turning to me: 'Marguerite,' he said, 'take leave of—your mothers, and tell them that you will never forget their kindness.'"

The girl paused, for her emotion had rendered her words almost unintelligible. But, with an effort, she speedily conquered her weakness.

"It was only then," she continued, "that I realised how much I loved these poor nuns, whom I had sometimes almost cursed. I felt now how close the ties were, that bound me to this hospitable roof, and to these unfortunate children, my companions in misery and loneliness. It seemed to me as if my heart were breaking; and the superior, who was generally so impassible, appeared scarcely less moved than myself. At last, M. de Chalusse took me by the hand and led me away. In the street there was a carriage waiting for us, not such a beautiful one as that which had been sent to fetch me from my workshop, but a much larger one, with trunks and boxes piled on its roof. It was drawn by four grey horses. I felt more dead than alive, as I entered the carriage and took the seat which the count pointed out. He sat down opposite to me. All the sisters had assembled at the door of the asylum, and even the superior wept without making any attempt to hide her tears. 'Farewell!' they all cried; 'farewell, farewell, dear child! Don't forget your old friends. We shall pray for your happiness.' Alas! God could not have heard their prayers. At a sign from M. de Chalusse, a footman closed the door, the postilions cracked their whips, and the heavy vehicle rolled away.

"The die was cast. Henceforth, an impassable gulf was to separate me from this asylum, whither I had been carried in my infancy half dead, and wrapped in swaddling clothes, from which every mark that could possibly lead to identification had been carefully cut away. Whatever my future might prove, I felt that my past was gone forever. But I was too greatly agitated even to think; and crouching in a corner of the carriage, I watched M. de Chalusse with the poignant anxiety a slave displays as he studies his new master. Ah! monsieur, what a wondrous change! A mask seemed to have fallen from the count's face; his lips quivered, a tender light beamed in his eyes, and he drew me to him, exclaiming: 'Oh, Marguerite! my beloved Marguerite! At last—at last He sobbed—this old man, whom I had thought as cold and as insensible as marble; he crushed me in his close embrace, he almost smothered me with kisses. And I was frightfully agitated by the strange, indefinable feeling, kindled in my heart; but I no longer trembled with fear. An inward voice whispered that this was but the renewal of a former tie—one which had somehow been mysteriously broken. However, as I remembered the superior's assertion that it was a

miracle in my favour—a wonderful interposition of Providence, I had courage enough to ask: 'So it was not chance that guided you in your choice?'

"My question seemed to take him by surprise. 'Poor Marguerite!' he murmured, 'dearly beloved child! for years I have been labouring to bring about this chance!' Instantly all the romantic stories I had heard in the asylum recurred to my mind. And Heaven knows there are plenty of these stories transmitted by the sisters from generation to generation, till they have become a sort of Golden Legend for poor foundlings. That sad formula, 'Father and mother unknown,' which figures on certificates of birth, acts as a dangerous stimulant for unhealthy imaginations, and leaves an open door for the most extravagant hopes. And thus influenced, I fixed my eyes on the face of the Count de Chalusse, striving to discover some resemblance in his features to my own. But he did not seem to notice my intent gaze, and following his train of thought, he muttered: 'Chance! It was necessary that they should think so, and they did think so. And yet the cleverest detectives in Paris, from old Tabaret to Fortunat, both masters in the art of following up a clue, had exhausted their resources in helping me in my despairing search.' The agony of suspense I was enduring had become intolerable; and unable to restrain myself longer, I exclaimed, with a wildly throbbing heart: 'Then, you are my father, Monsieur le Comte?' He pressed his hand to my lips with such violence that he hurt me, and then, in a voice quivering with excitement, he replied: 'Imprudent girl! What can you mean? Forget that unfortunate idea. Never utter the name of father—you hear me—never! I forbid it!' He had become extremely pale, and he looked anxiously around him, as if he feared that some one had overheard me—as if he had forgotten that we were alone in a carriage which was dashing onward at full speed!

"I was stupefied and alarmed by the sudden terror which M. de Chalusse had displayed and could not control. What could it all mean? What sorrowful recollections, what mysterious apprehensions, had my words aroused in the count's mind? I could not understand or imagine why he should regard my question as strange or unnatural. On the contrary, I thought it perfectly natural, dictated as it had been by circumstances, and by the count's own words and manner. And, in spite of my confusion and agitation, the inexplicable voice which we call presentiment whispered in my heart: 'He has forbidden you to *call* him father, but he has not said that he is not your father.' However, I had not time to reflect or to question M. de Chalusse any more, though at that moment I should have had the courage to do so; afterwards I did not dare.

"Our carriage had drawn up outside the railway station, and the next instant we alighted. Then, for the first time, I learned the magical power of money, I, a poor girl—reared by public charity—and who for three years had worked for my daily bread. M. de Chalusse found the servants, who were to accompany us, awaiting him. They had thought of everything, and made every possible arrangement for our comfort. I had scarcely time to glance round me before we were on the platform in front of a train, which was ready to start. I perceived the very carriage that had brought us to the station already fastened on a low open truck, and I was advancing to climb into it, when M. de Chalusse stopped me. 'Not there,' said he, 'come with me.' I followed him, and he led me to a magnificent saloon carriage, much higher and roomier than the others, and emblazoned with the Chalusse coat-of-arms. 'This is our carriage, dear Marguerite,' he said. I got in. The whistle sounded; and the train started off."

Mademoiselle Marguerite was growing very tired. Big drops of perspiration stood out on her forehead, she panted for breath, and her voice began to fail her.

The magistrate was almost frightened. "Pray rest a little, mademoiselle," he entreated, "there is no hurry."

But she shook her head and replied: "It is better to go on. I should never have courage to begin again if I paused." And thereupon she continued: "I had never gone farther than Versailles. This journey was at first as delightful as a glimpse into fairy-land. Our carriage was one of those costly whims which some millionaires indulge in. It consisted of a central saloon—a perfect *chef-d'œuvre* of taste and luxury—with two compartments at either end, furnished with comfortable sleeping accommodation. And all this, the count seemed never weary of repeating, was mine—mine alone. Leaning back on the velvet cushions, I gazed at the changing landscape, as the train rushed madly on. Leaning over me, M. de Chalusse named all the towns and villages we passed: Brunoy, Melun, Fontainebleau, Villeneuve, Sens, Laroche. And each time the train stopped the servants came to ask if we wished for anything. When we reached Lyons, in the middle of the night, we found a delicious supper awaiting us. It was served as soon as we alighted, and in due time we were warned that the train was ready to start, and then we resumed our journey. You can imagine, perhaps, how marvellous all this seemed to a poor little apprentice, whose only ambition a week before was to earn five francs a day. What a change indeed! At last the count made me retire to one of the compartments, where I soon fell asleep, abandoning my efforts to distinguish what was dream-like in my situation from reality. However, when I woke up I became terribly anxious. I asked myself what was awaiting me at the end of this long journey. M. de Chalusse's manner continued kind, and even affectionate; but he had regained his accustomed reserve and self-control, and I realised that it would be useless on my part to question him. At last, after a thirty hours' journey by rail, we again entered the count's berline, drawn by post-horses, and eventually M. de Chalusse said to me: 'Here is Cannes—we are at our journey's end.'

"In this town, which is one of the most charming that overlook the blue waters of the Mediterranean, the count owned a palace embowered among lovely orange-trees, only a few steps from the sea, and in full view of the myrtle and laurel groves which deck the isles of Sainte Marguerite. He told me that he proposed spending a few months here in seclusion, so as to give me time to accustom myself to my new position and the luxury that surrounded me. I was, indeed, extremely awkward, and my excessive timidity was increased by my pride. I did not know what to say, or what to do. I did not know how to use my hands, nor how to walk, nor how to carry myself. Everything embarrassed and frightened me; and I was conscious of my awkwardness, without being able to remedy it. I saw my blunders, and knew that I spoke a different language to that which was spoken around me. And yet the memory of Cannes will ever be dear to me. For there I first met the only friend I have now left in this world. I did not exchange a word with him, but by the quickened throbbings of my heart, when our eyes met, I felt that he would exert a powerful influence over my life, and events have since proved that I was not deceived. At that time, however, he was a stranger to me; and nothing on earth would have induced me to make inquiries concerning him. It was only by

chance I learned that he lived in Paris, that his name was Pascal, and that he had come south as a companion to a sick friend.

"By a single word the count could have ensured the happiness of my life and his own, but he did not speak it. He was the kindest and most indulgent of guardians, and I was often affected to tears by his tenderness. But, although my slightest wish was law, he did not grant me his confidence. The secret—the mystery that stood between us—was like a wall of ice. Still, I was gradually becoming accustomed to my new life, and my mind was regaining its equilibrium, when one evening the count returned home more agitated and excited, if possible, than on the day of my departure from the asylum. He summoned his valet, and, in a tone that admitted no reply, he exclaimed, 'I wish to leave Cannes at once—I must start in less than an hour—so procure some post-horses instantly.' And in answer to my inquiring glance, he said: 'It must be. It would be folly to hesitate. Each moment increases the peril that threatens us.'

"I was very young, inexperienced, and totally ignorant of life; but my sufferings, my loneliness, and the prospect of being compelled to rely upon myself, had imparted to my mind that precocious maturity which is so often observed among the children of the poor. Knowing from the very first that there was some mystery connected with the count's life, I had studied him with a child's patient sagacity—a sagacity which is all the more dangerous, as it is unsuspected—and I had come to the conclusion that a constant dread rendered his life a burden. Could it be for himself that he trembled, this great nobleman, who was so powerful by reason of his exalted rank, his connections, and his wealth? Certainly not. Was it for me, then? Undoubtedly it was. But why? It had not taken me long to discover that he was concealing me, or, at least, that he endeavoured by all means in his power to prevent my presence in his house from being known beyond a very limited circle of friends. Our hurried departure from Cannes confirmed me in my impression.

"It might have been truly called a flight. We left that same evening at eleven o'clock, in a pouring rain, with the first horses that could be procured. Our only attendant was the count's valet—not Casimir, the man who insulted me a little while ago—but another man, an old and valued servant, who has since died, unfortunately, and who possessed his master's entire confidence. The other servants were dismissed with a princely gratuity, and told to disperse two days after our departure. We did not return to Paris, but journeyed towards the Italian frontier, and on arriving at Nice in the dead of night, we drove directly to the quay. The postilions unharnessed the horses, and we remained in the carriage. The valet, however, hastened off, and more than two hours elapsed before he returned. He declared that he had found it very difficult to procure what he wished for, but that at last, by a prodigal outlay of money, he had succeeded in overcoming all obstacles. What M. de Chalusse desired was a vessel ready for sea, and the bark which the valet had chartered now came up to the quay. Our carriage was put on board, we went below, and before daybreak we were under way.

"Three days later we were in Genoa, registered under a false name in a second class hotel. While we were on the open sea, the count had seemed to be less agitated, but now he was far from calm, and the precautions he took proved that he still feared pursuit. A malefactor flying from justice could not have taken greater pains to mislead the detectives on his track. And facts proved conclusively that I was the sole cause of the count's ap-

prehension. On one occasion I even heard him discussing with his valet the feasibility of clothing me in masculine attire. And it was only the difficulty of obtaining a suitable costume that prevented him from carrying this project into execution. I ought to mention, however, that the servant did not share his master's anxiety, for three or four times I overheard him saying: 'The count is too good to worry himself so much about such bad stock. Besides, she won't overtake us. It isn't certain that she has even followed us. How can she know anything about it?' She! Who was she? This is what I racked my brain to discover, but without success. I must confess, monsieur, that being of a practical nature, and not in the least degree romantic, I arrived at the conclusion that the peril chiefly existed in the count's imagination, or that he greatly exaggerated it. Still he suffered none the less on that account, as was shown by the fact that the following month was spent in hurried journeys from one Italian city to another.

"It was the end of May before M. de Chalusse would consent to return to France; and then we went direct to Lyons. We had spent a couple of days there, when the count informed me that prudence required us to separate for a time—that our safety demanded this sacrifice. And without giving me time to say a word, he began to explain the advantages that would accrue from such an arrangement. I was extremely ignorant, and he wished me to profit by our temporary separation to raise my knowledge to a level with my new social position. He had, accordingly, made arrangements for me to enter the convent of Sainte-Marthe, an educational establishment which is as celebrated in the department of the Rhone as the Convent des Oiseaux is in Paris. He added that it would not be prudent for him to visit me; and he made me solemnly promise that I would never mention his name to any of my schoolmates. I was to send any letters I might write to an address which he would give me, and he would sign his answers with a fictitious name. He also told me that the lady superior of Sainte-Marthe knew his secret, and that I could confide in her. He was so restless and so miserably unhappy on the day when he acquainted me with these plans, that I really believed him insane. Nevertheless, I replied that I would obey him, and to tell the truth, I was not ill pleased at the thought of the change. My life with M. de Chalusse was a monotonous and cheerless one. I was almost dying of *ennui*, for I had been accustomed to work, bustle, and confusion with the Greloux, and I felt delighted at the prospect of finding myself among companions of my own age.

"Unfortunately, M. de Chalusse had forgotten one circumstance, which made my two years' sojourn at Sainte-Marthe a lingering and cruel agony. At first I was kindly treated by my schoolmates. A new pupil is always welcome, for her arrival relieves the monotony of convent-life. But it was not long before my companions wished to know my name; and I had none other than Marguerite to give them. They were astonished and wished to know who my parents were. I could not tell an untruth; and I was obliged to confess that I knew nothing at all respecting my father or my mother. After that 'the bastard'—for such was the name they gave me—was soon condemned to isolation. No one would associate with me during play-time. No one would sit beside me in the school-room. At the piano lesson, the girl who played after me pretended to wipe the keyboard carefully before commencing her exercises. I struggled bravely against this unjust ostracism; but all in vain. I was so unlike these other girls in character and disposition, and I had, moreover, been guilty of a great imprudence. I had been silly enough to show my companions the

costly jewels which M. de Chalusse had given me, but which I never wore. And on two occasions I had proved to them that I had more money at my disposal than all the other pupils together. If I had been poor, they would, perhaps, have treated me with affected sympathy; but as I was rich, I became an enemy. It was war; and one of those merciless wars which sometimes rage so furiously in convents, despite their seeming quiet.

"I should surprise you, monsieur, if I told you what refined torture these daughters of noblemen invented to gratify their petty spite. I might have complained to the superior, but I scorned to do so. I buried my sorrow deep in my heart, as I had done years before; and I firmly resolved never to show ought but a smiling, placid face, so as to prove to my enemies that they were powerless to disturb my peace of mind. Study became my refuge and consolation; and I plunged into work with the energy of despair. I should probably still live at Sainte-Marthe now, had it not been for a trivial circumstance. One day I had a quarrel with my most determined enemy, a girl named Anaïs de Rochecote. I was a thousand times right; and I would not yield. The superior dared not tell me I was wrong. Anaïs was furious, and wrote I don't know what falsehoods to her mother. Madame de Rochecote thereupon interested the mothers of five or six other pupils in her daughter's quarrel, and one evening these ladies came in a body, and nobly and courageously demanded that the 'bastard' should be expelled. It was impossible, outrageous, monstrous, they declared, that their daughters should be compelled to associate with a girl like me—a nameless girl, who humiliated the other girls with her ill-gotten wealth. The superior tried to take my part; but these ladies declared they would take their daughters from the convent if I were not sent away. There was no help for it: I was sacrificed. Summoned by telegraph, M. de Chalusse hastened to Lyons, and two days later I left Sainte-Martha with jeers and opprobrious epithets ringing in my ears."

X.

Once before, that very morning, the magistrate had witnessed a display of the virile energy with which misfortune and suffering had endowed this proud but naturally timid girl. But he was none the less surprised at the sudden explosion of hatred which he now beheld; for it was hatred. The way in which Mademoiselle Marguerite's voice had quivered as she pronounced the name of Anaïs de Rochecote proved, unmistakeably, that hers was one of those haughty natures that never forget an insult. All signs of fatigue had now disappeared. She had sprung from her chair, and remembrance of the shameful, cowardly affront she had received had brought a vivid flush to her cheeks and a bright gleam to her eyes.

"This atrocious humiliation happened scarcely a year ago, monsieur," she resumed; "and there is but little left for me to tell you. My expulsion from Sainte-Marthe made M. de Chalusse frantic with indignation. He knew something that I was ignorant of—that Madame de Rochecote, who enacted the part of a severe and implacable censor, was famed for the laxity of her morals. The count's first impulse was to wreak vengeance on my persecutors; for, in spite of his usual coolness, M. de Chalusse had a furious temper at times. It was only with the greatest difficulty that I dissuaded him from challenging General de Rochecote, who was living at the time. However, it now became necessary to make some other arrangements for

me. M. de Chalusse offered to find another school, promising to take such precautions as would insure my peace of mind. But I interrupted him before he had spoken a dozen words, declaring I would rather return to the book-binders than chance another such experiment. And what I said I meant. A subterfuge—a fictitious name, for instance—could alone shield me from persecution similar to what I had endured at Sainte-Marthe. But I knew that I was incapable of playing such a part—I felt that I should somehow confess everything. My firmness imparted some resolution to M. de Chalusse. He exclaimed, with an oath, that I was right—that he was weary of all this deception and concealment, and that he would make arrangements to have me near him. 'Yes,' he concluded, embracing me, 'the die is cast, come what may!'

"However, these measures required a certain delay; and, in the meantime, he decided to install me in Paris, which is the only place where one can successfully hide from prying eyes. He purchased a small but convenient house, surrounded by a garden, in the neighbourhood of the Luxembourg Palace, and here he installed me, with two old women and a trusty man-servant. As I needed a chaperon, he went in quest of one, and found Madame Léon."

On hearing this name, the magistrate gave the young girl a searching look, as if he hoped to discover what estimate she had formed of the housekeeper's character, as well as what degree of confidence she had granted her. But Mademoiselle Marguerite's face remained unaltered in expression.

"After so many trials," she resumed, "I thought I should now find rest and peace. Yes, I believed so; and the few months I spent in that quiet house will be the happiest of my life—I am sure of it. Judge of my surprise when, on going down into the little garden on the second day after my arrival, I saw the young man whom I had met at Cannes, and whose face had lingered in my memory for more than two years as the type of all that was best and noblest in the human countenance. He was standing near the gate. A cloud passed before my eyes. What mysterious freak of fate had caused him to pause there at that particular moment? This much is certain, he recognized me as I had recognized him. He bowed, smiling somewhat, and I fled indoors again, indignant with myself for not being angry at his audacity. I made many plans that day, but the next morning, at the same hour, I hid myself behind a Venetian blind, and saw him pause at the gate, and gaze at the garden with evident anxiety. I soon learned that he lived near by, with his widowed mother; and twice a day, when he went to the Palais de Justice and returned, he passed my home."

Her cheeks were crimson now, her eyes were lowered, and she was evidently embarrassed. But suddenly, as if ashamed of her blushes, she proudly raised her head, and said, in a firmer voice: "Shall I tell you our simple story? Is it necessary? I should not have concealed anything that has passed from my mother, if I had been so happy as to possess a mother. A few moments' conversation now and then, the exchange of a few letters, the pressure of a hand through the garden gate, and that is all. Still, I have been guilty of a grave and irreparable fault: I have disobeyed the one rule of my life—frankness; and I am cruelly punished for doing so. I did not tell all this to M. de Chalusse—in fact, I dared not. I was ashamed of my cowardice; from day to day I vowed that I would confess everything, and yet I procrastinated. I said to myself every night, 'It shall be done to-morrow;' but when the morrow came I said, 'I will give myself another day—just one

more day.' Indeed, my courage failed me when I thought of the count's aristocratic prejudices; and besides, I knew how ambitious he was for my future. On the other hand, moreover, Pascal was always pleading: 'Don't speak now. My circumstances are constantly improving. The day is not far off when I shall be able to offer you wealth and fame. When that day comes I will go to your guardian and ask him for your hand; but in Heaven's name don't speak now.' I understood Pascal's motives well enough. The count's immense fortune frightened him, and he feared that he would be accused of being a fortune-hunter. So I waited, with that secret anguish which still haunts those who have been unhappy even when their present is peaceful, and their future seems bright. I kept my secret, saying to myself that such happiness was not meant for me, that it would soon take flight.

"It took flight all too soon. One morning I heard a carriage draw up outside our door, and the next moment the Count de Chalusse entered the sitting-room. 'Everything is ready to receive you at the Hôtel de Chalusse, Marguerite,' said he, 'come!' He ceremoniously offered me his arm, and I accompanied him. I could not even leave a message for Pascal, for I had never made a confidante of Madame Léon. Still, a faint hope sustained me. I thought that the precautions taken by M. de Chalusse would somewhat dispel the uncertainty of my position, and furnish me at least with some idea of the vague danger which threatened me. But no. His efforts, so far as I could discover, had been confined to changing his servants. Our life in this grand house was the same as it had been at Cannes—even more secluded, if that were possible. The count had aged considerably. It was evident that he was sinking beneath the burden of some ever-present sorrow. 'I am condemning you to a cheerless and melancholy youth,' he sometimes said to me, 'but it will not last forever—patience, patience!' Did he really love me? I think so. But his affection showed itself in a strange manner. Sometimes his voice was so tender that my heart was touched. At others there was a look of hatred in his eyes which terrified me. Occasionally he was severe almost to brutality, and then the next moment he would implore me to forgive him, order the carriage, take me with him to his jewellers', and insist upon me accepting some costly ornaments. Madame Léon declares that my jewels are worth more than twenty thousand francs. At times I wondered if his capricious affection and sternness were really intended for myself. It often seemed to me that I was only a shadow—the phantom of some absent person, in his eyes. It is certain that he often requested me to dress myself or to arrange my hair in a certain fashion, to wear such and such a colour, or to use a particular perfume which he gave me. Frequently, when I was moving about the house, he suddenly exclaimed: 'Marguerite! I entreat you, remain just where you are!'

"I obeyed him, but the illusion had already vanished. A sob or an oath would come from his lips, and then in an angry voice he would bid me leave the room."

The magistrate did not raise his eyes from his talismanic ring; it might have been supposed that it had fascinated him. Still, his expression denoted profound commiseration, and he shook his head thoughtfully. The idea had occurred to him that this unfortunate young girl had been the victim, not precisely of a madman, but of one of those maniacs who have just enough reason left to invent the tortures they inflict upon those around them.

Speaking more slowly than before, as if she were desirous of attracting increased attention on the magistrate's part, Mademoiselle Marguerite now continued: "If I reminded M. de Chalusse of a person whom he had formerly loved, that person may have been my mother. I say, *may have been*, because I am not certain of it. All my efforts to discover the truth were unavailing. M. de Chalusse seemed to take a malicious pleasure in destroying all my carefully-arranged theories, and in upsetting the conjectures which he had encouraged himself only twenty-four hours previously. Heaven only knows how anxiously I listened to his slightest word! And it can be easily understood why I did so. My strange and compromising connection with him drove me nearly frantic. It was not strange that people's suspicions were aroused. True, he had changed all his servants before my arrival here; but he had requested Madame Léon to remain with me, and who can tell what reports she may have circulated? It has often happened that when returning from mass on Sundays, I have overheard persons say, 'Look! there is the Count de Chalusse's mistress!' Oh! not a single humiliation has been spared me—not a single one! However, on one point I did not feel the shadow of a doubt. The count had known my mother. He frequently alluded to her, sometimes with an outburst of passion which made me think that he had once adored, and still loved her; sometimes, with insults and curses which impressed me with the idea that she had cruelly injured him. But most frequently he reproached her for having unhesitatingly sacrificed me to ensure her own safety. He said she could have had no heart; and that it was an unheard of, incomprehensible, and monstrous thing that a woman could enjoy luxury and wealth, undisturbed by remorse, knowing that her innocent and defenceless child was exposed all the while to the hardships and temptations of abject poverty. I was also certain that my mother was a married woman, for M. de Chalusse alluded to her husband more than once. He hated him with a terrible hatred. One evening, when he was more communicative than usual, he gave me to understand that the great danger he dreaded for me came either from my mother or her husband. He afterwards did his best to counteract this impression; but he did not succeed in convincing me that his previous assertion was untrue."

The magistrate looked searchingly at Mademoiselle Marguerite. "Then those letters which we found just now in the escritoire are from your mother, mademoiselle?" he remarked.

The girl blushed. She had previously been questioned respecting these letters, and she had then made no reply. Now, she hesitated for a moment, and then quietly said: "Your opinion coincides with mine, monsieur."

Thereupon, as if she wished to avoid any further questioning on the subject, she hurriedly continued: "At last, a new and even greater trouble came—a positive calamity, which made me forget the disgrace attached to my birth. One morning at breakfast, about a month ago, the count informed me that he expected two guests to dinner that evening. This was such an unusual occurrence that I was struck speechless with astonishment. 'It is extraordinary, I admit,' he added, gaily; 'but it is nevertheless true. M. de Fondège and the Marquis de Valorsay will dine here this evening. So, my dear Marguerite, look your prettiest in honour of our old friend.' At six o'clock the two gentlemen arrived together. I was well acquainted with M. de Fondège—the general, as he was commonly called. He was the count's only intimate friend, and often visited us. But I had never before seen the Marquis de Valorsay, nor had I ever heard his name until M. de

Chalusse mentioned it that morning, I don't pretend to judge him. I will only say that as soon as I saw him, the dislike I felt for him bordered on aversion. My false position rendered his close scrutiny actually painful to me, and his attentions and compliments pleased me no better. At dinner he addressed his conversation exclusively to me, and I particularly remember a certain picture he drew of a model household, which positively disgusted me. In his opinion, a husband ought to content himself with being his wife's prime minister—the slave of her slightest caprice. He intended, if he married, to allow the Marquise de Valorsay perfect freedom, with an unlimited amount of money, the handsomest carriages, and the most magnificent diamonds in Paris—everything, indeed, that could gratify her vanity, and render her existence a fairy-like dream. 'With such ideas on her husband's part the marchioness will be very difficult to please if she is not contented with her lot,' he added, glancing covertly at me. This exasperated me beyond endurance, and I drily replied: 'The mere thought of such a husband would drive me to the shelter of a convent.' He seemed considerably disconcerted; and I noticed that the general, I mean M. de Fondège, gave him a mischievous look.

"However, when the gentlemen had gone, M. de Chalusse scolded me severely. He said that my sentimental philosophy was quite out of place in a drawing-room, and that my ideas of life, marriage, and duty, could only have been gained in a foundling asylum. As I attempted to reply, he interrupted me to sound the praises of the Marquis de Valorsay, who not only came of an ancient family, and possessed immense, unencumbered estates, but was a talented handsome man into the bargain; in short, one of those favoured mortals whom all young girls sigh for. The scales fell from my eyes. I instantly understood that M. de Chalusse had selected the Marquis de Valorsay to be my husband, and thus the marquis had designedly explained his matrimonial programme for my benefit. It was a snare to catch the bird. I felt indignant that he should suppose me so wanting in delicacy of feeling and nobility of character as to be dazzled by the life of display and facile pleasure which he had depicted. I had disliked him at first, and now I despised him; for it was impossible to misunderstand the shameless proposal concealed beneath his half-jesting words. He offered me my liberty in exchange for my fortune. That is only a fair contract, one might say. Perhaps so; but if he were willing to do this for a certain amount of money, what would he not do for a sum twice or thrice as large? Such were my impressions, though I asked myself again and again if I were not mistaken. No; the events that followed only confirmed my suspicions. Three days later the marquis came again. His visit was to the count, and they held a long conference in this study. Having occasion to enter the room, after the marquis's departure, I noticed on the table a number of title deeds which he had probably brought for the count's inspection. On the following week there was another conference, and this time a lawyer was present. Any further doubts I might have felt were dispelled by Madame Léon, who was always well informed—thanks to her habit of listening at the key-holes. 'They are talking of marrying you to the Marquis de Valorsay—I heard them,' she remarked to me.

"However, the information did not terrify me. I had profited by the time allowed me for reflection, and I had decided upon the course I should pursue. I am timid, but I am not weak; and I was determined to resist M. de Chalusse's will in this matter, even if it became necessary for me to leave his house, and renounce all hopes of the wealth he had promised me.

Still I said nothing to Pascal of my mental struggle and final determination. I did not wish to bind him by the advice which he would certainly have given me. I had his troth, and that sufficed. And it was with a thrill of joy that I said to myself: 'What does it matter if M. de Chalusse should be so angered by my refusal to obey him as to drive me from his house? It will rather be so much the better; Pascal will protect me.'

"But resistance is only possible when you are attacked; and M. de Chalusse did not even allude to the subject—perhaps because affairs had not yet been satisfactorily arranged between the marquis and himself—possibly because he wished to deprive me of the power to oppose him by taking me unawares. It would have been great imprudence on my part to broach the subject myself, and so I waited calmly and resignedly, storing up all my energy for the decisive hour. I willingly confess that I am not a heroine of romance—I do not look upon money with the contempt it deserves. I was resolved to wed solely in accordance with the dictates of my heart; but I wished, and *hoped*, that M. de Chalusse would give me, not a fortune, but a modest dowry. He had become more communicative than usual on money matters, and took no pains to conceal the fact that he was engaged in raising the largest possible amount of ready cash. He received frequent visits from his stock-broker, and sometimes when the latter had left him, he showed me rolls of bank-notes and packages of bonds, saying, as he did so: 'You see that your future is assured, my dear Marguerite.'

"I am only doing the count justice when I say that my future was a subject of constant anxiety to him during the last few months of his life. Less than a fortnight after he had taken me from the asylum, he drew up a will, in which he adopted me and made me his sole legatee. But he afterwards destroyed this document on the plea that it did not afford me sufficient security; and a dozen others shared the same fate. For his mind was constantly occupied with the subject, and he seemed to have a presentiment that his death would be a sudden one. I am forced to admit that he seemed less anxious to endow me with his fortune than to frustrate the hopes of some persons I did not know. When he burned his last will in my presence, he remarked: 'This document is useless: they would contest it, and probably succeed in having it set aside. I have thought of a better way; I have found an expedient which will provide for all emergencies.' And as I ventured some timid objection—for it was repugnant to my sense of honour to act as an instrument of vengeance or injustice, or assist, even passively, in despoiling any person of his rightful inheritance—he harshly, almost brutally, replied: 'Mind your own business! I will disappoint the folks who are waiting for my property as they deserve to be disappointed. They covet my estates do they! Very well, they shall have them. I will leave them my property, but they shall find it mortgaged to its full value.'

"Unfortunate man! all his plans have failed. The heirs whom he hated so bitterly, and whom I don't even know, whose existence people have not even suspected, can now come, and they will find the wealth he was determined to deprive them of intact. He dreamed of a brilliant destiny for me—a proud name, and the rank of a marchioness—and he has not even succeeded in protecting me from the most shameful insults. I have been accused of theft before his body was even cold. He wished to make me rich, frightfully rich, and he has not left me enough to buy my bread—literally, not enough to buy bread. He was in constant terror concerning my safety, and he died without even telling me what were the mysterious

dangers which threatened me; without even telling me something which I am morally certain of—that he was my father. He raised me against my will to the highest social position—he placed that wonderful talisman, gold, in my hand; he showed me the world at my feet; and suddenly he allowed me to fall even to lower depths of misery than those in which he found me. Ah! M. de Chalusse, it would have been far better for me if you had left me in the foundling asylum to have earned my own bread. And yet, I freely forgive you."

Mademoiselle Marguerite reflected for a moment, questioning her memory to ascertain if she had told everything—if she had forgotten any particulars of importance. And as it seemed to her that she had nothing more to add, she approached the magistrate, and, with impressive solemnity of tone and manner, exclaimed: "My life up to the present hour is now as well known to you as it is to myself. You know what even the friend, who is my only hope, does not know as yet. And now, when I tell him what I really am, will he think me unworthy of him?"

The magistrate sprang to his feet, impelled by an irresistible force. Two big tears, the first he had shed for years, trembled on his eye-lashes, and coursed down his furrowed cheeks. "You are a noble creature, my child," he replied, in a voice faltering with emotion; "and if I had a son, I should deem myself fortunate if he chose a wife like you."

She clasped her hands, with a gesture of intense joy and relief, and then sank into an arm-chair, murmuring, "Oh, thanks, monsieur, thanks!" For she was thinking of Pascal; and she had feared he might shrink from her when she fully revealed to him her wretched, sorrowful past, of which he was entirely ignorant. But the magistrate's words had reassured her.

XI.

THE clock on the mantel-shelf struck half-past four. The magistrate and Mademoiselle Marguerite could hear stealthy footsteps in the hall, and a rustling near the door. The servants were prowling round about the study, wondering what was the reason of this prolonged conference. "I must see how the clerk is progressing with the inventory," said the magistrate. "Excuse me if I absent myself for a moment; I will soon return." And so saying he rose and left the room.

But it was only a pretext. He really wished to conceal his emotion and regain his composure, for he had been deeply affected by the young girl's narrative. He also needed time for reflection, for the situation had become extremely complicated since Mademoiselle Marguerite had informed him of the existence of heirs—of those mysterious enemies who had poisoned the count's peace. These persons would, of course, require to know what had become of the millions deposited in the escritoire, and who would be held accountable for the missing treasure? Mademoiselle Marguerite, unquestionably. Such were the thoughts that flitted through the magistrate's mind as he listened to his clerk's report. Nor was this all; for having solicited Mademoiselle Marguerite's confidence, he must now advise her. And this was a matter of some difficulty.

However, when he returned to the study he was quite self-possessed and impassive again, and he was pleased to see that on her side the unfortunate girl had, to some extent, at least, recovered her wonted composure. "Let us now discuss the situation calmly," he began. "I shall convince

you that your prospects are not so frightful as you imagine. But before speaking of the future, will you allow me to refer to the past?" The girl bowed her consent. "Let us first of all consider the subject of the missing millions. They were certainly in the escritoire when M. de Chalusse replaced the vial; but now they are not to be found, so that the count must have taken them away with him."

"That thought occurred to me also."

"Did the treasure form a large package?"

"Yes, it was large; but it could have been easily concealed under the cloak which M. de Chalusse wore."

"Very good! What was the time when he left the house?"

"About five o'clock."

"When was he brought back?"

"At about half-past six."

"Where did the cabman pick him up?"

"Near the church of Notre Dame de Lorette, so he told me."

"Do you know the driver's number?"

"Casimir asked him for it, I believe."

Had any one inquired the reason of this semi-official examination, the magistrate would have replied that Mademoiselle Marguerite's interests alone influenced him in the course he was taking. This was quite true; and yet, without being altogether conscious of the fact, he was also impelled by another motive. This affair interested, almost fascinated, him on account of its mysterious surroundings, and influenced by the desire for arriving at the truth which is inherent in every human heart, he was anxious to solve the riddle. After a few moments' thoughtful silence, he remarked: "So the point of departure in our investigation, if there is an investigation, will be this: M. de Chalusse left the house with two millions in his possession; and while he was absent, he either disposed of that enormous sum—or else it was stolen from him."

Mademoiselle Marguerite shuddered. "Oh! stolen," she faltered.

"Yes, my child—anything is possible. We must consider the situation in every possible light. But to continue. Where was M. de Chalusse going?"

"To the house of a gentleman who would, he thought, be able to furnish the address given in the letter he had torn up."

"What was this gentleman's name?"

"Fortunat."

The magistrate wrote the name down on his tablets, and then, resuming his examination, he said: "Now, in reference to this unfortunate letter which, in your opinion, was the cause of the count's death, what did it say?"

"I don't know, monsieur. It is true that I helped the count in collecting the fragments, but I did not read what was written on them."

"That is of little account. The main thing is to ascertain who wrote the letter. You told me that it could only have come from the sister who disappeared thirty years ago, or else from your mother."

"That was, and still is, my opinion."

The magistrate toyed with his ring; and a smile of satisfaction stole over his face. "Very well!" he exclaimed, "in less than five minutes I shall be able to tell you whether the letter was from your mother or not. My method is perfectly simple. I have only to compare the handwriting with that of the letters found in the escritoire."

Mademoiselle Marguerite sprang up, exclaiming: "What a happy idea!"

But without seeming to notice the girl's surprise, he added: "Where are the remnants of this letter which you and the count picked up in the garden?"

"M. de Chalusse placed them in his pocket."

"They must be found. Tell the count's valet to look for them."

The girl rang; but M. Casimir, who was supposed to be engaged in making preparations for the funeral, was not in the house, However, another servant and Madame Léon offered their services, and certainly displayed the most laudable zeal, but their search was fruitless; the fragments of the letter could not be found. "How unfortunate!" muttered the Magistrate, as he watched them turn the pockets of the count's clothes inside out. "What a fatality! That letter would probably have solved the mystery."

Compelled to submit to this disappointment, he returned to the study; but he was evidently discouraged. Although he did not consider the mystery insoluble, far from it, he realised that time and research would be required to arrive at a solution, and that the affair was quite beyond his province. One hope alone remained.

By carefully studying the last words which M. de Chalusse had written and spoken he might arrive at the intention which had dictated them. Experience had wonderfully sharpened his penetration, and perhaps he might discover a hidden meaning which would throw light upon all this doubt and uncertainty. Accordingly, he asked Mademoiselle Marguerite for the paper upon which the count had endeavoured to pen his last wishes; and in addition he requested her to write on a card the dying man's last words in the order they had been uttered But on combining the written and the spoken words the only result obtained was as follows:—"My entire fortune—give—friends—against—Marguerite—despoiled—your mother—take care." These twelve incoherent words revealed the count's absorbing and poignant anxiety concerning his fortune and Marguerite's future, and also the fear and aversion with which Marguerite's mother inspired him. But that was all; the sense was not precise enough for any practical purpose. Certainly the word "give" needed no explanation. It was plain that the count had endeavoured to write, "I give my entire fortune." The meaning of the word "despoiled" was also clear. It had evidently been wrung from the half-unconscious man by the horrible thought that Marguerite—his own daughter, unquestionably—would not have a penny of all the millions he had intended for her. "Take care" also explained itself. But there were two words which seemed absolutely incomprehensible to the magistrate, and which he vainly strove to connect with the others in an intelligible manner. These were the words "friends" and "against," and they were the most legibly written of all. For the thirtieth time the magistrate was repeating them in an undertone, when a rap came at the door, and almost immediately Madame Léon entered the room.

"What is it?" inquired Mademoiselle Marguerite.

Laying a package of letters, addressed to M. de Chalusse, on the desk, the housekeeper replied: "These have just come by the post for the poor count. Heaven rest his soul!" And then handing a newspaper to Mademoiselle Marguerite, she added, in an unctuous tone: "And some one left this paper for mademoiselle at the same time."

"This paper—for me? You must be mistaken."

"Not at all. I was in the concierge's lodge when the messenger brought it; and he said it was for Mademoiselle Marguerite, from one of her friends."

And with these words she made one of her very best courtesies, and withdrew.

The girl had taken the newspaper, and now, with an air of astonishment and apprehension, she slowly unfolded it. What first attracted her attention was a paragraph on the first page marked round with red chalk. The paper had evidently been sent in order that she might read this particular passage, and accordingly she began to peruse it. "There was a great sensation and a terrible scandal last evening at the residence of Madame d'A——, a well known star of the first magnitude—"

It was the shameful article which described the events that had robbed Pascal of his honour. And to make assurance doubly sure, to prevent the least mistake concerning the printed initials, the coward who sent the paper had appended the names of the persons mixed up in the affair, at full length, in pencil. He had written d'Argelès, Pascal Ferailleur, Ferdinand de Coralth, Rochecote. And yet, in spite of these precautions, the girl did not at first seize the full meaning of the article; and she was obliged to read it over again. But when she finally understood it—when the horrible truth burst upon her—the paper fell from her nerveless hands, she turned as pale as death, and, gasping for breath, leaned heavily against the wall for support.

Her features expressed such terrible suffering that the magistrate sprang from his chair with a bound. "What has happened?" he eagerly asked.

She tried to reply, but finding herself unable to do so, she pointed to the paper lying upon the floor, and gasped: "There! there!"

The magistrate understood everything at the first glance; and this man, who had witnessed so much misery—who had been the confidant of so many martyrs—was filled with consternation at thought of the misfortunes which destiny was heaping upon this defenceless girl. He approached her, and led her gently to an arm-chair, upon which she sank, half fainting. "Poor child!" he murmured. "The man you had chosen—the man whom you would have sacrificed everything for—is Pascal Ferailleur, is he not?"

"Yes, it is he."

"He is an advocate?"

"As I have already told you, monsieur."

"Does he live in the Rue d'Ulm?"

"Yes."

The magistrate shook his head sadly. "It is the same," said he. "I also know him, my poor child; and I loved and honoured him. Yesterday I should have told you that he was worthy of you. He was above slander. But now, see what depths love of play has brought him to. He is a thief!"

Mademoiselle Marguerite's weakness vanished. She sprang from her chair, and indignantly faced the magistrate. "It is false!" she cried, vehemently; "and what that paper says is false as well!"

Had her reason been affected by so many successive blows? It seemed likely; for, livid a moment before, her face had now turned scarlet. She trembled nervously from head to foot, and there was a gleam of insanity in her big black eyes.

"If she doesn't weep, she is lost," thought the magistrate. And, instead of encouraging her to hope, he deemed it best to try and destroy what he considered a dangerous illusion. "Alas! my poor child," he said sadly,

"you must not deceive yourself. The newspapers are often hasty in their judgment; but an article like that is only published when proof of its truth is furnished by witnesses of unimpeachable veracity."

She shrugged her shoulders as if she were listening to some monstrous absurdities, and then thoughtfully muttered: "Ah! now Pascal's silence is explained; now I understand why he has not yet replied to the letter I wrote him last night."

The magistrate persevered, however, and added: "So, after the article you have just read, no one can entertain the shadow of a doubt."

Mademoiselle Marguerite hastily interrupted him. "But I have not doubted him for a second!" she exclaimed. "Doubt Pascal! I doubt Pascal! I would sooner doubt myself. *I* might commit a dishonourable act; I am only a poor, weak, ignorant girl, while he—he—You don't know, then, that he was my conscience? Before undertaking anything, before deciding upon anything, if ever I felt any doubt, I asked myself, 'What would he do?' And the mere thought of him is sufficient to banish any unworthy idea from my heart." Her tone and manner betokened complete and unwavering confidence; and her faith imparted an almost sublime expression to her face. "If I was overcome, monsieur." she continued, "it was only because I was appalled by the audacity of the accusation. How was it possible to make Pascal even *seem* to be guilty of a dishonourable act? This is beyond my powers of comprehension. I am only certain of one thing—that he is innocent. If the whole world rose to testify against him, it would not shake my faith in him, and even if he confessed that he was guilty I should be more likely to believe that he was crazed than culpable!"

A bitter smile curved her lips, she was beginning to judge the situation more correctly, and in a calmer tone she resumed: "Moreover, what does circumstantial evidence prove? Did you not this morning hear all our servants declaring that I was accountable for M. de Chalusse's millions? Who knows what might have happened if it had not been for your intervention? Perhaps, by this time, I should have been in prison."

"This is not a parallel case, my child."

"It *is* a parallel case, monsieur. Suppose, for one moment, that I had been formally accused—what do you think Pascal would have replied if people had gone to him, and said, 'Marguerite is a thief?' He would have laughed them to scorn, and have exclaimed, 'Impossible!'"

The magistrate's mind was made up. In his opinion, Pascal Ferailleur was guilty. Still it was useless to argue with the girl, for he felt that he should not be able to convince her. However he determined, if possible, to ascertain her plans in order to oppose them, if they seemed to him at all dangerous. "Perhaps you are right, my child," he conceded, "still, this unfortunate affair must change all your arrangements."

"Rather, it modifies them." Surprised by her calmness, he looked at her inquiringly. "An hour ago," she added "I had resolved to go to Pascal and claim his aid and protection as one claims an undeniable right or the fulfilment of a solemn promise; but now—"

"Well?" eagerly asked the magistrate.

"I am still resolved to go to him—but as an humble suppliant. And I shall say to him, 'You are suffering, but no sorrow is intolerable when there are two to bear the burden; and so, here I am. Everything else may fail you—your dearest friends may basely desert you; but here am I! Whatever your plans may be—whether you have decided to leave Europe

or to remain in Paris to watch for your hour of vengeance, you will need a faithful trusty companion—a confidant—and here I am! Wife, friend, sister—I will be whichever you desire. I am yours—yours unconditionally.'" And as if in reply to a gesture of surprise which escaped the magistrate, she added: "He is unhappy—I am free—I love him!"

The magistrate was struck dumb with astonishment. He knew that she would surely do what she said; he had realised that she was one of those generous, heroic women which are capable of any sacrifice for the man they love—a woman who would never shrink from what she considered to be her duty, who was utterly incapable of weak hesitancy or selfish calculation.

"Fortunately, my dear young lady, your devotion will no doubt be useless," he said at last.

"And why?"

"Because M. Ferailleur owes it to you, and, what is more, he owes it to himself, *not* to accept such a sacrifice." Failing to understand his meaning, she looked at him inquiringly. "You will forgive me, I trust," he continued, "if I warn you to prepare for a disappointment. Innocent or guilty, M. Ferailleur is—disgraced. Unless something little short of a miracle comes to help him his career is ended. This is one of those charges—one of those slanders, if you prefer that term, which a man can never shake off. So how can you hope that he will consent to link your destiny to his?"

She had not thought of this objection, and it seemed to her a terrible one. Tears came to her dark eyes, and in a despondent voice she murmured: "God grant that he will not evince such cruel generosity. The only great and true misfortune that could strike me now would be to have him repel me. M. de Chalusse's death leaves me without means—without bread; but now I can almost bless my poverty since it enables me to ask him what would become of me if he abandoned me, and who would protect me if he refused to do so. The brilliant career he dreamed of is ended, you say. Ah, well! I will console him, and though we are unfortunate, we may yet be happy. Our enemies are triumphant—so be it: we should only tarnish our honour by stooping to contend against such villainy. But in some new land, in America, perhaps, we shall be able to find some quiet spot where we can begin a new and better career." It was almost impossible to believe that it was Mademoiselle Marguerite, usually so haughtily reserved, who was now speaking with such passionate vehemence. And to whom was she talking in this fashion? To a stranger, whom she saw for the first time. But she was urged on by circumstances, the influence of which was stronger than her own will. They had led her to reveal her dearest and most sacred feelings and to display her real nature free from any kind of disguise.

However, the magistrate concealed the emotion and sympathy which filled his heart and refused to admit that the girl's hopes were likely to be realized. "And if M. Ferailleur refused to accept your sacrifice?" he asked.

"It is not a sacrifice, monsieur."

"No matter; but supposing he refused it, what should you do?"

"What should I do?" she muttered. "I don't know. Still I should have no difficulty in earning a livelihood. I have been told that I have a remarkable voice. I might, perhaps, go upon the stage."

The magistrate sprang from his arm-chair. "You become an actress, *you?*"

"Under such circumstances it would little matter what became of me!"

"But you don't suspect—you cannot imagine—"

He was at a loss for words to explain the nature of his objections to such a career; and it was Mademoiselle Marguerite who found them for him. "I suspect that theatrical life is an abominable life for a woman," she said, gravely; "but I know that there are many noble and chaste women who have adopted the profession. That is enough for me. My pride is a sufficient protection. It preserved me as an apprentice; it would preserve me as an actress. I might be slandered; but that is not an irremediable misfortune. I despise the world too much to be troubled by its opinion so long as I have the approval of my own conscience. And why should I not become a great *artiste* if I consecrated all the intelligence, passion, energy, and will I might possess, to my art?"

Hearing a knock at the door she paused; and a moment later a footman entered with lights, for night was falling. He was closely followed by another servant, who said: "Mademoiselle, the Marquis de Valorsay is below, and wishes to know if mademoiselle will grant him the honour of an interview."

XII.

On hearing M. de Valorsay's name, Mademoiselle Marguerite and the magistrate exchanged glances full of wondering conjecture. The girl was undecided what course to pursue; but the magistrate put an end to her perplexity. "Ask the marquis to come up," he said to the servant.

The footman left the room; and, as soon as he had disappeared, Mademoiselle Marguerite exclaimed: "What, monsieur! after all I have told you, you still wish me to receive him?"

"It is absolutely necessary that you should do so. You must know what he wishes and what hope brings him here. Calm yourself, and submit to necessity."

In a sort of bewilderment, the girl hastily arranged her disordered dress, and caught up her wavy hair which had fallen over her shoulders. "Ah! monsieur," she remarked, "don't you understand that he still believes me to be the count's heiress? In his eyes, I am still surrounded by the glamour of the millions which are mine no longer."

"Hush! here he comes!"

The Marquis de Valorsay was indeed upon the threshold, and a moment later he entered the room. He was clad with the exquisite taste of those intelligent gentlemen to whom the colour of a pair of trousers is a momentous matter, and whose ambition is satisfied if they are regarded as a sovereign authority respecting the cut of a waistcoat. As a rule, his expression of face merely denoted supreme contentment with himself and indifference as to others, but now, strange to say, he looked grave and almost solemn. His right leg—the unfortunate limb which had been broken when he fell from his horse in Ireland—seemed stiff, and dragged a trifle more than usual, but this was probably solely due to the influence of the atmosphere. He bowed to Mademoiselle Marguerite with every mark of profound respect, and without seeming to notice the magistrate's presence.

"You will excuse me, I trust, mademoiselle," said he, "in having insisted upon seeing you, so that I might express my deep sympathy. I have just heard of the terrible misfortune which has befallen you—the sudden death of your father."

She drew back as if she were terrified, and repeated: "My father!"

The marquis did not evince the slightest surprise. "I know," said he,

in a voice which he tried to make as feeling as possible, "I know that M. de Chalusse kept this fact concealed from you; but he confided his secret to me."

"To you?" interrupted the magistrate, who was unable to restrain himself any longer.

The marquis turned haughtily to this old man dressed in black, and in the dry tone one uses in speaking to an indiscreet inferior, he replied: "To me, yes, monsieur; and he acquainted me not only by word of mouth, but in writing also, with the motives which influenced him, expressing his fixed intention, not only of recognising Mademoiselle Marguerite as his daughter, but also of adopting her in order to ensure her undisputed right to his fortune and his name."

"Ah!" said the magistrate as if suddenly enlightened; "ah! ah!"

But without noticing this exclamation which was, at least, remarkable in tone, M. de Valorsay again turned to Mademoiselle Marguerite, and continued: "Your ignorance on this subject, mademoiselle, convinces me that your servants have not deceived me in telling me that M. de Chalusse was truck down without the slightest warning. But they have told me one thing which I cannot believe. They have told me that the count made no provision for you, that he left no will, and that—excuse a liberty which is prompted only by the most respectful interest—and that, the result of this incomprehensible and culpable neglect is that you are ruined and almost without means. Can this be possible?"

"It is the exact truth, monsieur," replied Mademoiselle Marguerite. "I am reduced to the necessity of working for my daily bread."

She spoke these words with a sort of satisfaction, expecting that the marquis would betray his disappointed covetousness by some significant gesture or exclamation, and she was already prepared to rejoice at his confusion. But her expectations were not realised. Instead of evincing the slightest dismay or even regret, M. de Valorsay drew a long breath, as if a great burden had been lifted from his heart, and his eyes sparkled with apparent delight. "Then I may venture to speak," he exclaimed, with unconcealed satisfaction, "I will speak, mademoiselle, if you will deign to allow me."

She looked at him with anxious curiosity, wondering what was to come. "Speak, monsieur," she faltered.

"I will obey you, mademoiselle," he said bowing again. "But first, allow me to tell you how great my hopes have been. M. de Chalussc's death is an irreparable misfortune for me as for yourself. He had allowed me, mademoiselle, to aspire to the honour of becoming a suitor for your hand. If he did not speak to you on the subject, it was only because he wished to leave you absolutely free, and impose upon me the difficult task of winning your consent. But between him and me everything had been arranged in principle, and he was to give a dowry of three millions of francs to Mademoiselle Marguerite de Chalusse, his daughter."

"I am no longer Mademoiselle de Chalusse, Monsieur le Marquis, and I am no longer the possessor of a fortune."

He felt the sharp sting of this retort, for the blood rose to his cheeks, still he did not lose his composure. "If you were still rich, mademoiselle," he replied, in the reproachful tone of an honest man who feels that he is misunderstood, "I should, perhaps, have strength to keep the sentiments with which you have inspired me a secret in my own heart; but—" He rose, and with a gesture which was not devoid of grace, and in a full ring-

ing voice he added: "But you are no longer the possessor of millions; and so I may tell you, Mademoiselle Marguerite, that I love you. Will you be my wife?"

The poor girl was obliged to exercise all her powers of self-control to restrain an exclamation of dismay. It was indeed more than dismay; she was absolutely terrified by the Marquis de Valorsay's unexpected declaration, and she could only falter: "Monsieur! monsieur!"

But with an air of winning frankness he continued: "Need I tell you who I am, mademoiselle? No; that is unnecessary. The fact that my suit was approved of by M. de Chalusse is the best recommendation I can offer you. The pure and stainless name I bear is one of the proudest in France; and though my fortune may have been somewhat impaired by youthful folly, it is still more than sufficient to maintain an establishment in keeping with my rank."

Mademoiselle Marguerite was still powerless to reply. Her presence of mind had entirely deserted her, and her tongue seemed to cleave to her palate. She glanced entreatingly at the old magistrate, as if imploring his intervention, but he was so absorbed in contemplating his wonderful ring, that one might have imagined he was oblivious of all that was going on around him.

"I am aware that I have so far not been fortunate enough to please you, mademoiselle," continued the marquis. "M. de Chalusse did not conceal it from me—I remember, alas! that I advocated in your presence a number of stupid theories, which must have given you a very poor opinion of me. But you will forgive me, I trust. My ideas have entirely changed since I have learned to understand and appreciate your vigorous intellect and nobility of soul. I thoughtlessly spoke to you in the language which is usually addressed to young ladies of our rank of life—frivolous beauties, who are spoiled by vanity and luxury, and who look upon marriage only as a means of enfranchisement."

His words were disjointed as if emotion choked his utterance. At times, it seemed as if he could scarcely command his feelings; and then his voice became so faint and trembling that it was scarcely intelligible.

However, by allowing him to continue, by listening to what he said, Mademoiselle Marguerite was encouraging him, even more—virtually binding herself. She understood that this was the case, and making a powerful effort, she interrupted him, saying: "I assure you, Monsieur le Marquis, that I am deeply touched—and grateful—but I am no longer free."

"Pray, mademoiselle, pray do not reply to-day. Grant me a little time to overcome your prejudices."

She shook her head, and in a firmer voice, replied: "I have no prejudices; but for some time past already, my future has been decided, irrevocably decided."

He seemed thunderstruck, and his manner apparently indicated that the possibility of a repulse had never entered his mind. His eyes wandered restlessly from Mademoiselle Marguerite to the countenance of the old magistrate, who remained as impassive as a sphinx, and at last they lighted on a newspaper which was lying on the floor at the young girl's feet. "Do not deprive me of all hope," he murmured.

She made no answer, and understanding her silence, he was about to retire when the door suddenly opened and a servant announced: "Monsieur de Fondège."

Mademoiselle Marguerite touched the magistrate on the shoulder to

attract his attention. "This gentleman is M. de Chalusse's friend whom I sent for this morning."

At the same moment a man who looked some sixty years of age entered the room. He was very tall, and as straight as the letter I, being arrayed in a long blue frock-coat, while his neck, which was as red and as wrinkled as that of a turkey-cock, was encased in a very high and stiff satin cravat. On seeing his ruddy face, his closely cropped hair, his little eyes twinkling under his bushy eyebrows, and his formidable moustaches à la Victor Emmanuel, you would have immediately exclaimed: "That man is an old soldier!"

A great mistake! M. de Fondège had never been in the service, and it was only in mockery of his somewhat bellicose manners and appearance that some twenty years previously his friends had dubbed him "the General." However the appellation had clung to him. The nickname had been changed to a title, and now M. de Fondège was known as "the General" everywhere. He was invited and announced as "the General." Many people believed that he had really been one, and perhaps he fancied so himself, for he had long been in the habit of inscribing "General A. de Fondège" on his visiting cards. The nickname had had a decisive influence on his life. He had endeavoured to show himself worthy of it, and the manners he had at first assumed, eventually became natural ones. He seemed to be the conventional old soldier—irascible, and jovial at the same time; brusque and kind; at once frank, sensible and brutal; as simple as a child, and yet as true as steel. He swore the most tremendous oaths in a deep bass voice, and whenever he talked his arms revolved like the sails of a windmill. However, Madame de Fondège, who was a very angular lady, with a sharp nose and very thin lips, assured people that her husband was not so terrible as he appeared. He was not considered very shrewd, and he pretended to have an intense dislike for business matters. No one knew anything precise about his fortune, but he had a great many friends who invited him to dinner, and they all declared that he was in very comfortable circumstances.

On entering the study this worthy man did not pay the slightest attention to the Marquis de Valorsay, although they were intimate friends. He walked straight up to Mademoiselle Marguerite, caught her in his long arms, and pressed her to his heart, brushing her face with his huge moustaches as he pretended to kiss her. "Courage, my dear," he growled; "courage. Don't give way. Follow my example. Look at me!" So saying he stepped back, and it was really amusing to see the extraordinary effort he made to combine a soldier's stoicism with a friend's sorrow. "You must wonder at my delay, my dear," he resumed, "but it was not my fault. I was at Madame de Rochecote's when I was informed that your messenger was at home waiting for me. I returned, and heard the frightful news. It was a thunderbolt. A friend of thirty years' standing! A thousand thunderclaps! I acted as his second when he fought his first duel. Poor Chalusse! A man as sturdy as an oak, and who ought to have outlived us all. But it is always so: the best soldiers always file by first at dress-parade."

The Marquis de Valorsay had beaten a retreat, the magistrate was hidden in a dark corner, and Mademoiselle Marguerite, who was accustomed to the General's manner, remained silent, being well aware that there was no chance of putting in a word as long as he had possession of the floor. "Fortunately, poor Chalusse was a prudent man," continued M. de

Fondège. "He loved you devotedly, my dear, as his testamentary provisions must have shown you."

"His provisions?"

"Yes, most certainly. Surely you don't mean to try and conceal anything from one who knows all. Ah! you will be one of the greatest catches in Europe, and you will have plenty of suitors."

Mademoiselle Marguerite sadly shook her head. "You are mistaken, General; the count left no will, and has made no provision whatever for me."

M. de Fondège trembled, turned a trifle pale, and in a faltering voice, exclaimed: "What! You tell me that? Chalusse! A thousand thunderclaps! It isn't possible."

"The count was stricken with apoplexy in a cab. He went out about five o'clock, on foot, and a little before seven he was brought home unconscious. Where he had been we don't know."

"You don't know? you don't know?"

"Alas! no; and he was only able to utter a few incoherent words before he died." Thereupon the poor girl began a brief account of what had taken place during the last four-and-twenty hours. Had she been less absorbed in her narrative she would have noticed that the General was not listening to her. He was sitting at the count's desk and was toying with the letters which Madame Léon had brought into the room a short time previously. One of them especially seemed to attract his attention, to exercise a sort of fascination over him as it were. He looked at it with hungry eyes, and whenever he touched it, his hand trembled, or involuntarily clinched. His face, moreover, had become livid; his eyes twitched nervously; he seemed to have a difficulty in breathing, and big drops of perspiration trickled down his forehead. If the magistrate were able to see the General's face, he must certainly have been of opinion that a terrible conflict was raging in his mind. The struggle lasted indeed for fully five minutes, and then suddenly, certain that no one saw him, he caught up the letter in question and slipped it into his pocket.

Poor Marguerite was now finishing her story: "You see, monsieur, that, far from being an heiress, as you suppose, I am homeless and penniless," she said.

The General had risen from his chair, and was striding up and down the room with every token of intense agitation. "It's true," he said apparently unconscious of his words. "She's ruined—lost—the misfortune is complete!" Then, suddenly pausing with folded arms in front of Mademoiselle Marguerite: "What are you going to do?" he asked.

'God will not forsake me, General," she replied.

He turned on his heel and resumed his promenade, wildly gesticulating and indulging in a furious monologue which was certainly not very easy to follow. "Frightful! terrible!" he growled. "The daughter of an old comrade—zounds!—of a friend of thirty years' standing—to be left in such a plight! Never, a thousand thunderclaps!—never! Poor child!—a heart of gold, and as pretty as an angel! This horrible Paris would devour her at a single mouthful! It would be a crime—an abomination! It sha'n't be!—the old veterans are here, firm as rocks!"

Thereupon, approaching the poor girl again, he exclaimed in a coarse but seemingly feeling voice: "Mademoiselle Marguerite."

"General?"

"You are acquainted with my son, Gustave de Fondège, are you not?"

"I think I have heard you speak of him to M. de Chalusse several times."

The General tugged furiously at his moustaches as was his wont whenever he was perplexed or embarrassed. "My son," he resumed, "is twenty-seven. He's now a lieutenant of hussars, and will soon be promoted to the rank of captain. He's a handsome fellow, sure to make his way in the world, for he's not wanting in spirit. As I never attempt to hide the truth, I must confess that he's a trifle dissipated; but his heart is all right, and a charming little wife would soon turn him from the error of his ways, and he'd become the pearl of husbands." He paused, passed his forefinger three or four times between his collar and his neck, and then, in a half-strangled voice, he added: "Mademoiselle Marguerite, I have the honour to ask for your hand in marriage on behalf of Lieutenant Gustave de Fondège, my son."

There was a dangerous gleam of anger in Mademoiselle Marguerite's eyes, as she coldly replied: "I am honoured by your request, monsieur; but my future is already decided."

Some seconds elapsed before M. de Fondège could recover his powers of speech. "This is a piece of foolishness," he faltered, at last with singular agitation. "Let me hope that you will reconsider the matter. And if Gustave doesn't please you, we will find some one better. But under no circumstances will Chalusse's old comrade ever desert you. I shall send Madame de Fondège to see you this evening. She's a good woman and you will understand each other. Come, answer me, what do you say to it?"

His persistence irritated the poor girl beyond endurance, and to put an end to the painful scene, she at last asked. "Would you not like to look —for the last time—at M. de Chalusse?"

"Ah! yes, certainly—an old friend of thirty years' standing." So saying he advanced towards the door leading into the death-room but on reaching the threshold, he cried in sudden terror: "Oh! no, no, I could not." And with these words he withdrew or rather he fled from the room down the stairs.

As long as the General had been there, the magistrate had given no sign of life. But seated beyond the circle of light cast by the lamps, he had remained an attentive spectator of the scene, and now that he found himself once more alone with Mademoiselle Marguerite he came forward, and leaning against the mantel-piece and looking her full in the face he exclaimed: "Well, my child?"

The girl trembled like a culprit awaiting sentence of death, and it was in a hollow voice that she replied: "I understood—"

"What?" insisted the pitiless magistrate.

She raised her beautiful eyes, in which angry tears were still glittering, and then answered in a voice which quivered with suppressed passion, "I have fathomed the infamy of those two men who have just left the house. I understood the insult their apparent generosity conceals. They had questioned the servants, and had ascertained that two millions were missing. Ah, the scoundrels! They believe that I have stolen those millions; and they came to ask me to share the ill-gotten wealth with them. What an insult! and to think that I am powerless to avenge it! Ah! the servants' suspicions were nothing in comparison with this. At least, they did not ask for a share of the booty as the price of their silence!"

The magistrate shook his head as if this explanation scarcely satisfied him. "There is something else, there is certainly something else," he repeated. But the doors were still open, so he closed them carefully, and then returned to the girl he was so desirous of advising. "I wish to tell

you," he said, "that you have mistaken the motives which induced these gentlemen to ask for your hand in marriage."

"Do you believe, then, that you have fathomed them?"

"I could almost swear that I had. Didn't you remark a great difference in their manner? Didn't one of them, the marquis, behave with all the calmness and composure which are the result of reflection and calculation? The other, on the contrary, acted most precipitately, as if he had suddenly come to a determination, and formed a plan on the impulse of the moment."

Mademoiselle Marguerite reflected.

"That's true," she said, "that's indeed true. Now I recollect the difference."

"And this is my explanation of it," resumed the magistrate. "The Marquis de Valorsay," I said to myself, "must have proofs in his possession that Mademoiselle Marguerite is the count's daughter—written and conclusive proofs, that is certain—probably a voluntary admission of the fact from the father. Who can prove that M. de Valorsay does not possess this acknowledgment? In fact, he must possess it. He hinted it himself." Accordingly on hearing of the count's sudden death, he said to himself, "If Marguerite was my wife, and if I could prove her to be M. de Chalusse's daughter, I should obtain several millions." Whereupon he consulted his legal adviser who assured him that it would be the best course he could pursue; and so he came here. You repulsed him, but he will soon make another assault, you may rest assured of that. And some day or other he will come to you and say, "Whether we marry or not, let us divide."

Mademoiselle Marguerite was amazed. The magistrate's words seemed to dispel the mist which had hitherto hidden the truth from view. "Yes," she exclaimed, "yes, you are right, monsieur."

He was silent for a moment, and then he resumed: "I understand M. de Fondège's motive less clearly; but still I have some clue. He had not questioned the servants. That is evident from the fact that on his arrival here he believed you to be the sole legatee. He was also aware that M. de Chalusse had taken certain precautions we are ignorant of, but which he is no doubt fully acquainted with. What you told him about your poverty amazed him, and he immediately evinced a desire to atone for the count's neglect with as much eagerness as if he were the cause of this negligence himself. And, indeed, judging by the agitation he displayed when he was imploring you to become his son's wife, one might almost imagine that the sight of your misery awakened a remorse which he was endeavouring to quiet. Now, draw your own conclusions."

The wretched girl looked questioningly at the magistrate as if she hesitated to trust the thoughts which his words had awakened in her mind. "Then you think, monsieur," she said, with evident reluctance, "you think, you suppose, that the General is acquainted with the whereabouts of the missing millions?"

"Quite correct," answered the magistrate, and then as if he feared that he had gone too far, he added: "but draw your own conclusions respecting the matter. You have the whole night before you. We will talk it over again to-morrow, and if I can be of service to you in any way, I shall be only too glad."

"But, monsieur—"

"Oh—to-morrow, to-morrow—I must go to dinner now; besides, my clerk must be getting terribly impatient."

The clerk was, indeed, out of temper. Not that he had finished taking

an inventory of the appurtenances of this immense house, but because he considered that he had done quite enough work for one day. And yet his discontent was sensibly diminished when he calculated the amount he would receive for his pains. During the nine years he had held this office he had never made such an extensive inventory before. He seemed somewhat dazzled, and as he followed his superior out of the house, he remarked: "Do you know, monsieur, that as nearly as I can discover the deceased's fortune must amount to more than twenty millions—an income of a million a year! And to think that the poor young lady shouldn't have a penny of it. I suspect she's crying her eyes out."

But the clerk was mistaken. Mademoiselle Marguerite was then questioning M. Casimir respecting the arrangements which he had made for the funeral, and when this sad duty was concluded, she consented to take a little food standing in front of the side-board in the dining-room. Then she went to kneel in the count's room, where four members of the parochial clergy were reciting the prayers for the dead.

She was so exhausted with fatigue that she could scarcely speak, and her eyelids were heavy with sleep. But she had another task to fulfil, a task which she deemed a sacred duty. She sent a servant for a cab, threw a shawl over her shoulders, and left the house accompanied by Madame Léon. The cabman drove as fast as possible to the house where Pascal and his mother resided in the Rue d'Ulm; but on arriving there, the front door was found to be closed, and the light in the vestibule was extinguished. Marguerite was obliged to ring five or six times before the concierge made his appearance.

"I wish to see Monsieur Ferailleur," she quietly said.

The man glanced at her scornfully, and then replied: "He no longer lives here. The landlord doesn't want any thieves in his house. He's sold his rubbish and started for America, with his old witch of a mother."

So saying he closed the door again, and Marguerite was so overwhelmed by this last and unexpected misfortune, that she could hardly stagger back to the vehicle. "Gone!" she murmured; "gone! without a thought of me! Or does he believe me to be like all the rest? But I will find him again. That man Fortunat, who ascertained addresses for M. de Chalusse, will find Pascal for me."

XIII.

Few people have any idea of the great number of estates which, in default of heirs to claim them, annually revert to the government. The treasury derives large sums from this source every year. And this is easily explained, for now-a-days family ties are becoming less and less binding. Brothers cease to meet; their children no longer know each other; and the members of the second generation are as perfect strangers as though they were not united by a bond of consanguinity. The young man whom love of adventure lures to a far-off country, and the young girl who marries against her parents' wishes, soon cease to exist for their relatives. No one even inquires what has become of them. Those who remain at home are afraid to ask whether they are prosperous or unfortunate, lest they should be called upon to assist the wanderers. Forgotten themselves, the adventurers in their turn soon forget. If fortune smiles upon them, they are careful not to inform their relatives. Poor—they have been cast off; wealthy—they themselves deny their kindred. Having become rich un-

aided, they find an egotistical satisfaction in spending their money alone in accordance with their own fancies. Now when a man of this class dies what happens? The servants and people around him profit of his loneliness and isolation, and the justice of the peace is only summoned to affix the seals, after they have removed all the portable property. An inventory is taken, and after a few formalities, as no heirs present themselves, the court declares the inheritance to be in abeyance, and appoints a trustee.

This trustee's duties are very simple. He manages the property and remits the income to the Treasury until a legal judgment declares the estate the property of the country, regardless of any heirs who may present themselves in future.

"If I only had a twentieth part of the money that is lost in this way, my fortune would be made," exclaimed a shrewd man, some thirty years ago.

The person who spoke was Antoine Vaudoré. For six months he secretly nursed the idea, studying it, examining it in all respects, weighing its advantages and disadvantages, and at last he decided that it was a good one. That same year, indeed, assisted by a little capital which he had obtained no one knew how, he created a new, strange, and untried profession to supply a new demand.

Thus Vaudoré was the first man who made heir-hunting a profession. As will be generally admitted, it is not a profession than can be successfully followed by a craven. It requires the exercise of unusual shrewdness, untiring activity, extraordinary energy and courage, as well as great tact and varied knowledge. The man who would follow it successfully must possess the boldness of a gambler, the *sang-froid* of a duellist, the keen perceptive powers and patience of a detective, and the resources and quick wit of the shrewdest attorney.

It is easier to decry the profession than to exercise it. To begin with, the heir-hunter must be posted up with information respecting unclaimed inheritances, and he must have sufficient acquaintance with the legal world to be able to obtain information from the clerks of the different courts, notaries, and so on. When he learns that a man has died without any known heirs, his first care is to ascertain the amount of unclaimed property, to see if it will pay him to take up the case. If he finds that the inheritance is a valuable one, he begins operations without delay. He must first ascertain the deceased's full name and age. It is easy to procure this information; but it is more difficult to discover the name of the place where the deceased was born, his profession, what countries he lived in, his tastes and mode of life—in a word everything that constitutes a complete biography.

However, when he has armed himself with the more indispensable facts, our agent opens the campaign with extreme prudence, for it would be ruinous to awake suspicion. It is curious to observe the incomparable address which the agent displays in his efforts to learn the particulars of the deceased's life, by consulting his friends, his enemies, his debtors, and all who ever knew him, until at last some one is found who says: "Such and such a man—why, he came from our part of the country. I never knew *him*, but I am acquainted with one of his brothers—with one of his uncles —or with one of his nephews."

Very often years of constant research, a large outlay of money, and costly and skilful advertising in all the European journals, are necessary before this result is reached. And it is only when it has been attained that the agent can take time to breathe. But now the chances are greatly in his

favour. The worst is over. The portion of his task which depended on chance alone is concluded. The rest is a matter of skill, tact, and shrewdness. The detective must give place to the crafty lawyer. The agent must confer with this heir, who has been discovered at the cost of so much time and trouble, and induce him to bestow a portion of this perspective wealth on the person who is able to establish his claim. There must be an agreement n writing clearly stating what proportion—a tenth, a third, or a half—the agent will be entitled to. The negotiation is a very delicate and difficult one, requiring prodigious presence of mind, and an amount of duplicity which would make the most astute diplomatist turn pale with envy. Occasionally, the heir suspects the truth, sneers at the proposition, and hurries off to claim the whole of the inheritance that belongs to him. The agent may then bid his hopes farewell. He has worked and spent money for nothing.

However, such a misfortune is of rare occurrence. On hearing of the unexpected good fortune that has befallen him, the heir is generally unsuspicious, and willingly promises to pay the amount demanded of him. A contract is drawn up and signed; and then, but only then, does the agent take his client into his confidence. "You are the relative of such a person, are you not?" "Yes." "Very well. He is dead, and you are his heir. Thank Providence, and make haste to claim your money."

As a rule, the heir loyally fulfills his obligation. But sometimes it happens that, when he has obtained undisputed possession of the property, he declares that he has been swindled, and refuses to fulfil his part of the contract. Then the case must go to the courts. It is true, however, that the judgment of the tribunals generally recalls the refractory client to a sense of gratitude and humility.

Now our friend M. Isidore Fortunat was a hunter of missing heirs. Undoubtedly he often engaged in other business which was a trifle less respectable; but heir-hunting was one of the best and most substantial sources of his income. So we can readily understand why he so quickly left off lamenting the loss of the forty thousand francs lent to the Marquis de Valorsay.

Changing his tactics, he said to himself that, even if he had lost this amount through M. de Chalusse's sudden death, it was much less than he might obtain if he succeeded in discovering the unknown heirs to so many millions. And he had some reason to hope that he would be able to do so. Having been employed by M. de Chalusse when the latter was seeking Mademoiselle Marguerite, M. Fortunat had gained some valuable information respecting his client, and the additional particulars which he had obtained from Madame Vantrasson elated him to such an extent that more than once he exclaimed: "Ah, well! it is, perhaps, a blessing in disguise, after all."

Still, M. Isidore Fortunat slept but little after his stormy interview with the Marquis de Valorsay. A loss of forty thousand francs is not likely to impart a roseate hue to one's dreams—and M. Fortunat prized his money as if it had been the very marrow of his bones. By way of consolation, he assured himself that he would not merely regain the sum, but triple it; and yet this encouragement did not entirely restore his peace of mind. The gain was only a possibility, and the loss was a certainty. So he twisted, and turned, and tossed on his bed as if it had been a hot gridiron, exhausting himself in surmises, and preparing his mind for the difficulties which he would be obliged to overcome.

His plan was a simple one, but its execution was fraught with difficulties. "I must discover M. de Chalusse's sister, if she is still living—I must discover her children, if she is dead," he said to himself. It was easy to *say* this; but how was he to do it? How could he hope to find this unfortunate girl, who had abandoned her home thirty years previously, to fly, no one knew where, or with whom? How was he to gain any idea of the life she had lived, or the fate that had befallen her? At what point on the social scale, and in what country, should he begin his investigations? These daughters of noble houses, who desert the paternal roof in a moment of madness, generally die most miserably after a wretched life. The girl of the lower classes is armed against misfortune, and has been trained for the conflict. She can measure and calculate the force of her fall, and regulate and control it to a certain extent. But the others cannot. They have never known privation and hardship, and are, therefore, defenceless. And for the very reason that they have been hurled from a great height, they often fall down into the lowest depths of infamy.

"If morning would only come," sighed M. Isidore Fortunat, as he tossed restlessly to and fro. "As soon as morning comes I will set to work!"

But just before daybreak he fell asleep; and at nine o'clock he was still slumbering so soundly that Madame Dodelin, his housekeeper, had considerable difficulty in waking him. "Your clerks have come," she exclaimed, shaking him vigorously; "and two clients are waiting for you in the reception-room."

He sprang up, hastily dressed himself, and went into his office. It cost him no little effort to receive his visitors that morning; but it would have been folly to neglect all his other business for the uncertain Chalusse affair. The first client who entered was a man still young, of common, even vulgar appearance. Not being acquainted with M. Fortunat, he deemed it proper to introduce himself without delay. "My name is Leplaintre, and I am a coal merchant," said he. "I was recommended to call on you by my friend Bouscat, who was formerly in the wine trade."

M. Fortunat bowed. "Pray be seated," was his reply. "I remember your friend very well. If I am not mistaken I gave him some advice with reference to his third failure."

"Precisely; and it is because I find myself in the same fix as Bouscat that I have called on you. Business is very bad, and I have notes to a large amount overdue, so that—"

"You will be obliged to go into bankruptcy."

"Alas! I fear so."

M. Fortunat already knew what his client desired, but it was against his principles to meet these propositions more than half way. "Will you state your case?" said he.

The coal merchant blushed. It was hard to confess the truth; but the effort had to be made. "This is my case," he replied, at last. "Among my creditors I have several enemies, who will refuse me a release. They would like to deprive me of everything I possess. And in that case, what would become of me? Is it right that I should be compelled to starve?"

"It is a bad outlook."

"It is, indeed, monsieur; and for this reason, I desire—if possible, if I can do so without danger—for I am an honest man, monsieur—I wish to retain a little property—secretly, of course, not for myself, by any means, but I have a young wife and—"

M. Fortunat took compassion on the man's embarrassment. "In short," he interrupted, "you wish to conceal a part of your capital from your creditors?"

On hearing this precise and formal statement of his honourable intentions, the coal-merchant trembled. His feelings of integrity would not have been alarmed by a periphrasis, but this plain speaking shocked him. "Oh, monsieur!" he protested, "I would rather blow my brains out than defraud my creditors of a single penny that was rightfully theirs. What I am doing is for their interest, you understand. I shall begin business again under my wife's name; and if I succeed, they shall be paid—yes, monsieur, every sou, with interest. Ah! if I had only myself to think of, it would be quite different; but I have two children, two little girls, so that—"

"Very well," replied M. Fortunat. "I should suggest to you the same expedient as I suggested to your friend Bouscat. But you must gather a little ready money together before going into bankruptcy."

"I can do that by secretly disposing of a part of my stock, so—"

"In that case, you are saved. Sell it and put the money beyond your creditors' reach."

The worthy merchant scratched his ear in evident perplexity. "Excuse me," said he. "I had thought of this plan; but it seemed to me—dishonourable—and—also very dangerous. How could I explain this decrease in my stock? My creditors hate me. If they suspected anything, they would accuse me of fraud, and perhaps throw me into prison; and then—"

M. Fortunat shrugged his shoulders. "When I give advice," he roughly replied, "I furnish the means of following it without danger. Listen to me attentively. Let us suppose, for a moment, that some time ago you purchased, at a very high figure, a quantity of stocks and shares, which are to-day almost worthless, could not this unfortunate investment account for the absence of the sum which you wish to set aside? Your creditors would be obliged to value these securities, not at their present, but at their former value."

"Evidently; but, unfortunately, I do not possess any such securities."

"You can purchase them."

The coal-merchant opened his eyes in astonishment. "Excuse me," he muttered, "I don't exactly understand you."

He did not understand in the least; but M. Fortunat enlightened him by opening his safe, and displaying an enormous bundle of stocks and shares which had flooded the country a few years previously, and ruined a great many poor, ignorant fools which were hungering for wealth; among them were shares in the Tifila Mining Company, the Berchem Coal Mines, the Greenland Fisheries, the Mutual Trust and Loan Association, and so on. There had been a time when each of these securities would have fetched five hundred or a thousand francs at the Bourse, but now they were not worth the paper on which they were printed.

"Let us suppose, my dear sir," resumed M. Fortunat, "that you had a drawer full of these securities—"

But the other did not allow him to finish. "I see," he exclaimed; "I see—I can sell my stock, and put the proceeds in my pocket with perfect safety. There is enough to represent my capital a thousand times over."

And, in a paroxysm of delight, he added:

"Give me enough of these shares to represent a capital of one hundred and twenty thousand francs; and give me some of each kind. I should like my creditors to have a variety."

Thereupon M. Fortunat counted out a pile of these worthless securities as carefully as if he had been handling bank-notes; and his client at the same time drew out his pocket-book.

"How much do I owe you?" he inquired.

"Three thousand francs."

The honest merchant bounded from his chair. "Three thousand francs!" he repeated. "You must be jesting. That trash is not worth a louis."

"I would not even give five francs for it," rejoined M. Fortunat, coldly: "but it is true that I don't desire to purchase these shares in my creditors' interest. With you it is quite a different matter—this trash, as you very justly call it, will save you at least a hundred thousand francs. I ask only three per cent. which is certainly not dear. Still, you know, I don't force any one to purchase them." And, in a terribly significant tone, he added: "You can undoubtedly buy similar securities on better terms; but take care that you don't arouse your creditors' suspicions by applying elsewhere."

"He would betray me, the scoundrel!" thought the merchant. And, realising that he had fallen into a trap, "Here are three thousand francs," he sighed; "but at least, my dear sir, give me good measure, and throw in a few thousand francs more."

The coal merchant smiled the ghastly smile of a man who sees no way of escape from imposition, and has, therefore, resolved to submit with the best grace possible. But M. Fortunat's gravity did not relax. He gave what he had promised—neither more nor less—in exchange for the bank-notes, and even gravely exclaimed: "See if the amount is correct."

His client pocketed the shares without counting them; but before leaving the room he made his estimable adviser promise to assist him at the decisive moment, and help him to prepare one of those clear financial statements which make creditors say: "This is an honest man who has been extremely unfortunate."

M. Fortunat was admirably fitted to render this little service; for he devoted such part of his time as was not spent in hunting for missing heirs to difficult liquidations, and he had indeed made bankruptcy a speciality in which he was without a rival. The business was a remunerative one, thanks to the expedient he had revealed to the coal merchant—an expedient which is common enough now-a-days, but of which he might almost be called the inventor. It consisted in compelling the persons who asked for his advice to purchase worthless shares at whatever price he chose to set upon them, and they were forced to submit, under penalty of denunciation and exposure.

The client who followed the coal merchant proved to be a simple creature, who had called to ask for some advice respecting a slight difficulty between himself and his landlord. M. Fortunat speedily disposed of him, and then, opening the door leading into the outer office, he called: "Cashier!"

A shabbily-dressed man, some thirty-five years of age, at once entered the private sanctum, carrying a money-bag in one hand and a ledger in the other.

"How many debtors were visited yesterday?" inquired M. Fortunat.

"Two hundred and thirty seven."

"What was the amount collected?"

"Eighty-nine francs."

M. Isidore Fortunat's grimace was expressive of satisfaction. "Not bad," said he, "not at all bad."

Then a singular performance began. M. Fortunat called over the names of his debtors, one by one, and the cashier answered each name by reading a memorandum written against it on the margin of a list he held. "Such a one," said the agent, "and such a one—and such—" Whereupon the cashier replied: "Has paid two francs—was not at home—paid twenty sous—would not pay anything."

How did it happen that M. Fortunat had so many debtors? This question can be easily answered. In settling bankrupts' estates it was easy for him to purchase a large number of debts which were considered worthless, at a trifling cost, and he reaped a bountiful harvest on a field which would have yielded nothing to another person. It was not because he was rigorous in his demands; he conquered by patience, gentleness, and politeness, but also by unwearying perseverance and tenacity. When he decided that a debtor was to pay him a certain sum, it was paid. He never relaxed in his efforts. Every other day some one was sent to visit the debtor, to follow him, and harass him; he was surrounded by M. Fortunat's agents; they pursued him to his office, shop, or café—everywhere, continually, incessantly—and always with the most perfect urbanity. At last even the most determined succumbed; to escape this frightful persecution, they, somehow or other, found the money to satisfy M. Fortunat's claim. Besides Victor Chupin, he had five other agents whose business it was to visit these poor wretches. A list was assigned to each man every morning; and when evening came, he made his report to the cashier, who, in turn, reported to his employer. This branch of industry added considerably to the profits of M. Fortunat's other business, and was the third and last string to his bow.

The report proceeded as usual, but it was quite evident that M. Fortunat's thoughts were elsewhere. He paused each moment to listen eagerly for the slightest sound outside, for before receiving the coal merchant he had told Victor Chupin to run to the Rue de Courcelles and ask M. Casimir for news of the Count de Chalusse. He had done this more than an hour before; and Victor Chupin, who was usually so prompt, had not yet made his appearance.

At last, however, he returned, whereupon M. Fortunat dismissed the cashier, and addressed his messenger: "Well?" he asked.

"He is no longer living. They think he died without a will, and that the pretty young lady will be turned out of the house."

This information agreed so perfectly with M. Fortunat's presentiments that he did not even wince, but calmly asked: "Will Casimir keep his appointment?"

"He told me that he would endeavour to come, and I'd wager a hundred to one that he will be there; he would travel ten leagues to put something good into his stomach."

M. Fortunat's opinion coincided with Chupin's. "Very well," said he. "Only you were a long time on the road, Victor."

"That's true m'sieur; but I had a little matter of my own to attend to—a matter of a hundred francs, if you please."

M. Fortunat knit his brows angrily. "It's only right to attend to business," said he; "but you think too much of money, Victor—altogether too much. You are insatiable."

The young man proudly lifted his head, and with an air of importance, replied: "I have so many responsibilities—"

"Responsibilities!—you?"

"Yes, indeed, m'sieur. And why not? My poor, good mother hasn't been able to work for a year, and who would care for her if I didn't? Certainly not my father, the good-for-nothing scamp, who squandered all the Duke de Sairmeuse's money without giving us a sou of it. Besides, I'm like other men, I'm anxious to be rich, and enjoy myself. I should like to ride in my carriage like other people do. And whenever a *gamin*, such as I was once, opened the door for *me*, I should put a five-franc piece in his hand—"

He was interrupted by Madame Dodelin, the worthy housekeeper, who rushed into the room without knocking, in a terrible state of excitement. "Monsieur!" she exclaimed, in the same tone as if she would have called "Fire!" "here is Monsieur de Valorsay."

M. Fortunat sprang up and turned extremely pale. "What to the devil brings him here?" he anxiously stammered. "Tell him that I've gone out—tell him—"

But it was useless, for the marquis at that very moment entered the room, and the agent could only dismiss his housekeeper and Chupin.

M. de Valorsay seemed to be very angry, and it looked as if he meant to give vent to his passion. Indeed, as soon as he was alone with M. Fortunat, he began: "So this is the way you betray your friends, Master Twenty-per-Cent! Why did you deceive me last night about the ten thousand francs you had promised me? Why didn't you tell me the truth? You knew of the misfortune that had befallen M. de Chalusse. I heard of it first scarcely an hour ago through a letter from Madame Léon."

M. Fortunat hesitated somewhat. He was a quiet man, opposed to violence of any kind; and it seemed to him that M. de Valorsay was twisting and turning his cane in a most ominous manner. "I must confess, Monsieur le Marquis," he at last replied, "that I had not the courage to tell you of the dreadful misfortune which had befallen us."

"How—*us?*"

"Certainly. If you lose the hope of several millions, I also lose the amount I advanced to you, forty thousand francs—my entire fortune. And yet, you see that I don't complain. Do as I do—confess that the game is lost."

The marquis was listening with an air of suppressed wrath; his face was crimson, there was a dark frown on his brow, and his hands were clinched. He was apparently furious with passion, but in reality he was perfectly self-possessed. The best proof that can be given of his coolness is that he was carefully studying M. Fortunat's face, and trying to discover the agent's real intentions under his meaningless words. He had expected to find "his dear extortioner," exasperated by his loss, cursing and swearing, and demanding his money—but not at all. He found him more gentle and calm, colder and more reserved than ever; brimful of resignation indeed, and preaching submission to the inevitable. "What can this mean?" he thought, with an anxious heart. "What mischief is the scoundrel plotting now? I'd wager a thousand to one that he's forging some thunderbolt to crush me." And, in a haughty tone, he said aloud:

"In a word, you desert me."

With a deprecatory gesture, M. Fortunat exclaimed: "I desert you, Monsieur le Marquis! What have I done that you should think so ill of

me? Alas! circumstances are the only traitors. I shouldn't like to deprive you of the courage you so much need, but, honestly, it would be folly to struggle against destiny. How can you hope to succeed in your plans? Have you not resorted to every possible expedient to prolong your apparently brilliant existence until the present time? Are you not at such a point that you must marry Mademoiselle Marguerite in a month's time, or perish? And now the count's millions are lost! If I might be allowed to give you some advice, I should say, 'The shipwreck is inevitable; think only of saving yourself.' By tact and shrewdness, you might yet save something from your creditors. Compromise with them. And if you need my services, here I am. Go to Nice, and give me a power of attorney to act for you. From the *débris* of your fortune, I will undertake to guarantee you a competence which would satisfy many an ambitious man."

The marquis laughed sneeringly. "Excellent!" he exclaimed. "You would rid yourself of me and recover your forty thousand francs at the same time. A very clever arrangement."

M. Fortunat realised that his client understood him; but what did it matter? "I assure you—" he began.

But the marquis silenced him with a contemptuous gesture. "Let us stop this nonsense," said he. "We understand each other better than that. I have never made any attempt to deceive you, nor have I ever supposed that I had succeeded in doing so, and pray do me the honour to consider me as shrewd as yourself." And still refusing to listen to the agent, he continued: "If I have come to you, it is only because the case is not so desperate as you suppose. I still hold some valuable cards which you are ignorant of. In your opinion, and every one else's, Mademoiselle Marguerite is ruined. But I know that she is still worth three millions, at the very least."

"Mademoiselle Marguerite?"

"Yes, Monsieur Twenty-per-Cent. Let her become my wife, and the very next day I will place her in possession of an income of a hundred and fifty thousand francs. But she must marry me first; and this scornful maiden will not grant me her hand unless I can convince her of my love and disinterestedness."

"But your rival?"

M. de Valorsay gave a nervous start, but quickly controlled himself. "He no longer exists. Read this day's *Figaro*, and you will be edified. I have no rival now. If I can only conceal my financial embarrassment a little longer, she is mine. A friendless and homeless girl cannot defend herself long in Paris—especially when she has an adviser like Madame Léon. Oh! I shall win her! I shall have her!—she is a necessity to me. Now you can judge if it would be wise on your part to deprive me of your assistance. Would you like to know what I want? Simply this—the means to sustain me two or three months longer—some thirty thousand francs. You can procure the money—will you? It would make, in all, seventy thousand francs that I should owe you, and I will promise to pay you two hundred and fifty thousand if I succeed—and I shall succeed! Such profit is worth some risk. Reflect, and decide. But no more subterfuges, if you please. Let your answer be plain yes or no."

Without a second's hesitation, M. Fortunat replied, "No."

The flush on the marquis's face deepened, and his voice became a trifle harsher; but that was all. "Confess then, that you have resolved to ruin me," he said. "You refuse before you have heard me to the end. Wait,

at least, until I have told you my plans, and shown you the solid foundation which my hopes rest upon."

But M. Fortunat had resolved to listen to nothing. He wished for no explanations, so distrustful was he of himself—so much did he fear that his adventurous nature would urge him to incur further risk. He was positively afraid of the Marquis de Valorsay's eloquence; besides, he knew well enough that the person who consents to listen is at least half convinced. "Tell me nothing, monsieur," he hastily answered; "it would be useless. I haven't the money. If I had given you ten thousand francs last night, I should have been compelled to borrow them of M. Prosper Bertomy. And even if I had the money, I should still say 'Impossible.' Every man has his system—his theory, you know. Mine is, never to run after my money. With me, whatever I may lose, I regard it as finally lost; I think no more about it, and turn to something else. So your forty thousand francs have already been entered on my profit and loss account. And yet it would be easy enough for you to repay me, if you would follow my advice and go quietly into bankruptcy."

"Never!" interrupted M. de Valorsay; "never! I do not wish to temporize," he continued. "I will save all, or save nothing. If you refuse me your help, I shall apply elsewhere. I will never give my good friends, who detest me, and whom I cordially hate in return, the delicious joy of seeing the Marquis de Valorsay fall step by step from the high position he has occupied. I will never truckle to the men whom I have eclipsed for fifteen years. No, never! I would rather die, or even commit the greatest crime!"

He suddenly checked himself, a trifle astonished, perhaps, by his own plain-speaking; and, for a moment, he and M. Fortunat looked into each other's eyes, striving to divine their respective secret thoughts.

The marquis was the first to speak. "And so," said he, in a tone which he strove to make persuasive, but which was threatening instead, "it is settled—your decision is final?"

"Final."

"You will not even condescend to listen to my explanation?"

"It would be a loss of time."

On receiving this cruel reply, M. de Valorsay struck the desk such a formidable blow with his clenched fist that several bundles of papers fell to the floor. His anger was not feigned now. "What are you plotting, then?" he exclaimed; "and what do you intend to do? What is your object in betraying me? Take care! It is my life that I am going to defend, and as truly as there is a God in heaven, I shall defend it well. A man who is determined to blow his brains out if he is defeated, is a terribly dangerous adversary. Woe to you, if I ever find you standing between me and the Count de Chalusse's millions!"

Every drop of blood had fled from M. Fortunat's face, still his mien was composed and dignified. "You do wrong to threaten me," said he. "I don't fear you in the least. If I were your enemy, I should bring suit against you for the forty thousand francs you owe me. I should not obtain my money, of course, but I could shatter the tottering edifice of your fortune by a single blow. Besides, you forget that I possess a copy of our agreement, signed by your own hand, and that I have only to show it to Mademoiselle Marguerite to give her a just opinion of your disinterestedness. Let us sever our connection now, monsieur, and each go his own way without reference to the other. If you should succeed you will repay me."

Victory perched upon the agent's banner, and it was with a feeling of pride that he saw his noble client depart, white and speechless with rage. "What a rascal that marquis is," he muttered. "I would certainly warn Mademoiselle Marguerite, poor girl, if I were not so much afraid of him."

XIV.

M. Casimir, the deceased Count de Chalusse's valet, was neither better nor worse than most of his fellows. Old men tell us that there formerly existed a race of faithful servants, who considered themselves a part of the family that employed them, and who unhesitatingly embraced its interests and its ideas. At the same time their masters requited their devotion by efficacious protection and provision for the future. But such masters and such servants are now-a-days only found in the old melodramas performed at the Ambigu, in "The Emigré," for instance, or in "The Last of the Châteauvieux." At present servants wander from one house to another, looking on their abode as a mere inn where they may find shelter till they are disposed for another journey. And families receive them as transient, and not unfrequently as dangerous, guests, whom it is always wise to treat with distrust. The key of the wine-cellar is not confided to these unreliable inmates; they are intrusted with the charge of little else than the children—a practice which is often productive of terrible results.

M. Casimir was no doubt honest, in the strict sense of the word. He would have scorned to rob his master of a ten sous piece; and yet he would not have hesitated in the least to defraud him of a hundred francs, if an opportunity had presented itself. Vain and rapacious in disposition, he consoled himself by refusing to obey any one save his employer, by envying him with his whole heart, and by cursing fate for not having made him the Count de Chalusse instead of the Count de Chalusse's servant. As he received high wages, he served passably well; but he employed the best part of his energy in watching the count. He scented some great family secret in the household, and he felt angry and humiliated that this secret had not been intrusted to his discretion. And if he had discovered nothing, it was because M. de Chalusse had been caution personified, as Madame Léon had declared.

Thus it happened that when M. Casimir saw Mademoiselle Marguerite and the count searching in the garden for the fragments of a letter destroyed in a paroxysm of rage which he had personally witnessed, his natural curiosity was heightened to such a degree as to become unendurable. He would have given a month's wages, and something over, to have known the contents of that letter, the fragments of which were being so carefully collected by the count. And when he heard M. de Chalusse tell Mademoiselle Marguerite that the most important part of the letter was still lacking, and saw his master relinquish his fruitless search, the worthy valet vowed that he would be more skilful or more fortunate than his master; and after diligent effort, he actually succeeded in recovering five tiny scraps of paper, which had been blown into the shrubbery.

They were covered with delicate handwriting, a lady's unquestionably; but he was utterly unable to extract the slightest meaning from them. Nevertheless, he preserved them with jealous care, and was careful not to say that he had found them. The incoherent words which he had deciphered on these scraps of paper mixed strangely in his brain, and he grew

more and more anxious to learn what connection there was between this letter and the count's attack. This explains his extreme readiness to search the count's clothes when Mademoiselle Marguerite told him to look for the key of the escritoire. And fortune favoured him, for he not only found the key, but he also discovered the torn fragments of the letter, and having crumpled them up in the palm of his hand, he contrived to slip them into his pocket. Fruitless dexterity! M. Casimir had joined these scraps to the fragments he had found himself, he had read and re-read the epistle, but it told him nothing; or, at least, the information it conveyed was so vague and incomplete that it heightened his curiosity all the more. Once he almost decided to give the letter to Mademoiselle Marguerite, but he resisted this impulse, saying to himself: "Ah, no; I'm not such a fool! It might be of use to her."

And M. Casimir had no desire to be of service to this unhappy girl, who had always treated him with kindness. He hated her, under the pretence that she was not in her proper place, that no one knew who or what she was, and that it was absurd that he—he, Casimir—should be compelled to receive orders from her. The infamous slander which Mademoiselle Marguerite had overheard on her way home from church, "There goes the rich Count de Chalusse's mistress," was M. Casimir's work. He had sworn to be avenged on this haughty creature; and no one can say what he might have attempted, if it had not been for the intervention of the magistrate. Imperatively called to order, M. Casimir consoled himself by the thought that the magistrate had intrusted him with eight thousand francs and the charge of the establishment. Nothing could have pleased him better. First and foremost it afforded him a magnificent opportunity to display his authority and act the master, and it also enabled him to carry out his compact with Victor Chupin, and repair to the rendezvous which M. Isidore Fortunat had appointed.

Leaving his comrades to watch the magistrate's operations, he sent M. Bourigeau to report the count's death at the district mayor's office, and then lighting a cigar he walked out of the house, and strolled leisurely up the Rue de Courcelles. The place appointed for his meeting with M. Fortunat was on the Boulevard Haussmann, almost opposite Binder's the famous carriage builder. Although it was rather a wine-shop than a restaurant, a capital breakfast could be obtained there as M. Casimir had ascertained to his satisfaction several times before. "Has no one called for me?" he asked, as he went in.

"No one."

He consulted his watch, and evinced considerable surprise. "Not yet noon!" he exclaimed, "I'm in advance; and as that is the case, give me a glass of absinthe and a newspaper."

He was obeyed with far more alacrity than his deceased master had ever required him to show, and he forthwith plunged into the report of the doings at the Bourse, with the eagerness of a man who has an all-sufficient reason for his anxiety in a drawer at home. Having emptied one glass of absinthe, he was about to order a second, when he felt a tap on the shoulder, and on turning round he beheld M. Isidore Fortunat.

In accordance with his wont, the agent was attired in a style of severe elegance—with gloves and boots fitting him to perfection—but an unusually winning smile played upon his lips. "You see I have been waiting for you," exclaimed M. Casimir.

"I am late, it's true," replied M. Fortunat, "but we will do our best to

make up for lost time; for, I trust, you will do me the honour of breakfasting with me?"

"Really, I don't know that I ought."

"Yes, yes, you must. They will give us a private room; we must have a talk."

It was certainly not for the pleasure of the thing that M. Fortunat cultivated M. Casimir's acquaintance, and entertained him at breakfast. M. Fortunat, who was a very proud man, considered this connection somewhat beneath his dignity; but at first, circumstances, and afterwards interest, had required him to overcome his repugnance. It was through the Count de Chalusse that he had made M. Casimir's acquaintance. While the count was employing the agent he had frequently sent his valet to him with messages and letters. Naturally, M. Casimir had talked on these occasions, and the agent had listened to him; hence this superficial friendship. Subsequently when the marriage contemplated by the Marquis de Valorsay was in course of preparation, M. Fortunat had profited of the opportunity to make the count's servant his spy; and it had been easy to find a pretext for continuing the acquaintance, as M. Casimir was a speculator, or rather a dabbler in stocks and shares. So, whenever he needed information, M. Fortunat invited M. Casimir to breakfast, knowing the potent influence of a good bottle of wine offered at the right moment. It is needless to say that he exercised uncommon care in the composition of the *menu* on a day like this when his future course depended, perhaps, on a word more or less.

M. Casimir's eye sparkled as he took his seat at the table opposite his entertainer. The crafty agent had chosen a little room looking out on to the boulevard. Not that it was more spacious or elegant than the others, but it was isolated, and this was a very great advantage; for everyone knows how unsafe and perfidious are those so-called private rooms which are merely separated from each other by a thin partition, scarcely thicker than a sheet of paper. It was not long before M. Fortunat had reason to congratulate himself on his foresight, for the breakfast began with a dish of shrimps, and M. Casimir had not finished his twelfth, washed down by a glass of chablis, before he declared that he could see no impropriety in confiding certain things to a friend.

The events of the morning had completely turned his head; and gratified vanity and good cheer excited him to such a degree that he discoursed with unwonted volubility. With total disregard of prudence, he talked with inexcusable freedom of the Count de Chalusse, and M. de Valorsay, and especially of his enemy, Mademoiselle Marguerite. "For it is she," he exclaimed, rapping on the table with his knife—"it is she who has taken the missing millions! How she did it, no one will ever know, for she has not an equal in craftiness; but it's she who has stolen them, I'm sure of it! I would have taken my oath to that effect before the magistrate, and I would have proved it, too, if he hadn't taken her part because she's pretty—for she is devilishly pretty."

Even if M. Fortunat had wished to put in a word or two, he could have found no opportunity. But his guest's loquacity did not displease him; it gave him an opportunity for reflection. Strange thoughts arose in his mind, and connecting M. Casimir's affirmations with the assurances of the Marquis de Valorsay, he was amazed at the coincidence. "It's very singular!" he thought. "Has this girl really stolen the money? and has the marquis discovered the fact through Madame Léon, and determined to profit by the

theft? In that case, I may get my money back, after all! I must look into the matter."

A partridge and a bottle of Pomard followed the shrimps and chablis; and M. Casimir's loquacity increased, and his voice rose higher and higher. He wandered from one absurd story to another, and from slander to slander, until suddenly, and without the slightest warning, he began to speak of the mysterious letter which he considered the undoubted cause of the count's illness.

At the first word respecting this missive, M. Fortunat started violently. "Nonsense!" said he, with an incredulous air. "Why the devil should this letter have had such an influence?"

"I don't know. But it is certain—it had." And, in support of his assertion, he told M. Fortunat how the count had destroyed the letter almost without reading it, and how he had afterwards searched for the fragments, in order to find an address it had contained. "And I'm quite sure," said the valet, "that the count intended to apply to you for the address of the person who wrote the letter."

"Are you sure of that?"

"As sure as I am of drinking Pomard!" exclaimed M. Casimir, draining his glass.

Rarely had the agent experienced such emotion. He did not doubt, but what this missive contained the solution of the mystery. "Were the scraps of this letter found?" he asked.

"I have them," cried the valet, triumphantly. "I have them in my pocket, and, what's more, I have the whole of them!"

This declaration made M. Fortunat turn pale with delight. "Indeed—indeed!" said he, "it must be a strange production."

His companion pursed up his lips disdainfully. "May be so, may be not," he retorted. "It's impossible to understand a word of it. The only thing certain about it is that it was written by a woman."

"Ah!"

"Yes, by a former mistress, undoubtedly. And, naturally, she asks for money for a child. Women of that class always do so. They've tried the game with me more than a dozen times, but I'm not so easily caught." And bursting with vanity, he related three or four love affairs in which, according to his own account, he must have played a most ignoble part.

If M. Fortunat's chair had been a gridiron, heated by an excellent fire, he could not have felt more uncomfortable. After pouring out bumper after bumper for his guest, he perceived that he had gone too far, and that it would not be easy to check him. "And this letter?" he interrupted, at last.

"Well?"

"You promised to let me read it."

"That's true—that's quite true; but it would be as well to have some mocha first, would it not? What if we ordered some mocha, eh?"

Coffee was served, and when the waiter had closed the door, M. Casimir drew the letter, the scraps of which were fixed together, from his pocket, and unfolded it, saying: "Attention; I'm going to read."

This did not suit M. Fortunat's fancy. He would infinitely have preferred perusing it himself; but it is impossible to argue with an intoxicated man, and so M. Casimir with a more and more indistinct enunciation read as follows: "'Paris, October 14, 186—.' So the lady lives in Paris, as usual. After this she puts neither 'monsieur,' nor 'my friend,' nor 'dear

count,' nothing at all. She begins abruptly: 'Once before, many years ago, I came to you as a suppliant. You were pitiless, and did not even deign to answer me. And yet, as I told you, I was on the verge of a terrible precipice; my brain was reeling, vertigo had seized hold of me. Deserted, I was wandering about Paris, homeless and penniless, and my child was starving!'"

M. Casimir paused to laugh. "That's like all the rest of them," he exclaimed, "that is exactly like all the rest! I've ten such letters in my drawer, even more imperative in their demands. If you'll come home with me after breakfast, I'll show them to you. We'll have a hearty laugh over them!"

"Let us finish this first."

"Of course." And he resumed: "'If I had been alone, I should not have hesitated. I was so wretched that death seemed a refuge to me. But what was to become of my child? Should I kill him, and destroy myself afterwards? I thought of doing so, but I lacked the courage. And what I implored you in pity to give me, was rightfully mine. I had only to present myself at your house and demand it. Alas! I did not know that then. I believed myself bound by a solemn oath, and you inspired me with inexpressible terror. And still I could not see my child die of starvation before my very eyes. So I abandoned myself to my fate, and I have sunk so low that I have been obliged to separate from my son. He must not know the shame to which he owes his livelihood. And he is ignorant even of my existence.'"

M. Fortunat was as motionless as if he had been turned to stone. After the information he had obtained respecting the count's past, and after the story told him by Madame Vantrasson, he could scarcely doubt. "This letter," he thought, "can only be from Mademoiselle Hermine de Chalusse."

However, M. Casimir resumed his reading: "'If I apply to you again, if from the depth of infamy into which I have fallen, I again call upon you for help, it is because I am at the end of my resources—because, before I die, I must see my son's future assured. It is not a fortune that I ask for him, but sufficient to live upon, and I expect to receive it from you.'"

Once more the valet paused in his perusal of the letter to remark. "There it is again—sufficient to live upon, and I expect to receive it from you!—Excellent! Women are remarkable creatures, upon my word! But listen to the rest! 'It is absolutely necessary that I should see you as soon as possible. Oblige me, therefore, by calling to-morrow, October 15th, at the Hôtel de Homburg, in the Rue du Helder. You will ask for Madame Lucy Huntley, and they will conduct you to me. I shall expect you from three o'clock to six. Come. I implore you, come. It is painful to me to add that if I do not hear from you, I am resolved to demand and *obtain*—no matter what may be the consequences—the means which I have, so far, asked of you on my bended knees and with clasped hands.'"

Having finished the letter, M. Casimir laid it on the table, and poured out a glassful of brandy, which he drained at a single draught. "And that's all," he remarked. "No signature—not even an initial. It was a so-called respectable woman who wrote that. They never sign their notes, the hussies! for fear of compromising themselves, as I've reason to know." And so saying, he laughed the idiotic laugh of a man who has been drinking immoderately. "If I had time," he resumed, "I should make some inquiries about this Madame Lucy Huntley—a feigned name, evidently. I

should like to know— But what's the matter with you, Monsieur Fortunat? You are as pale as death. Are you ill?"

To tell the truth, the agent did look as if he were indisposed. "Thanks," he stammered. "I'm very well, only I just remembered that some one is waiting for me."

"Who?"

"A client."

"Nonsense!" rejoined the valet, "make some excuse; let him go about his business. Aren't you rich enough? Pour us out another glass of wine; it will make you all right again."

M. Fortunat complied, but he performed the task so awkwardly, or, rather, so skilfully, that he drew towards him, with his sleeve, the letter which was lying beside M. Casimir's plate. "To your health," said the valet. "To yours," replied M. Fortunat. And in drawing back the arm he had extended to chink glasses with his guest, he caused the letter to fall on his knees.

M. Casimir, who had not observed this successful manœuvre, was trying to light his cigar; and while vainly consuming a large quantity of matches in the attempt, he exclaimed: "What you just said, my friend, means that you would like to desert me. That won't do, my dear fellow! You are going home with me; and I will read you some love-letters from a woman of the world. Then we will go to Mourloup's, and play a game of billiards. That's the place to enjoy one's self. You'll see Joseph, of the Commarin household, a splendid comedian."

"Very well; but first I must settle the score here."

"Yes, pay."

M. Fortunat rang for his bill. He had obtained more information than he expected; he had the letter in his pocket, and he had now only one desire, to rid himself of M. Casimir. But this was no easy task. Drunken men cling tenaciously to their friends; and M. Fortunat was asking himself what strategy he could employ, when the waiter entered, and said: "There's a very light-complexioned man here, who looks as if he were a huissier's clerk. He wishes to speak with you, gentlemen."

"Ah! it's Chupin!" exclaimed the valet. "He is a friend. Let him come in, and bring us another glass. 'The more the merrier,' as the saying goes."

What could Chupin want? M. Fortunat had no idea, but he was none the less grateful for his coming, being determined to hand this troublesome Casimir over to his keeping. On entering the room Chupin realised the valet's condition at the first glance, and his face clouded. He bowed politely to M. Fortunat, but addressed Casimir in an extremely discontented tone. "It's three o'clock," said he, "and I've come, as we agreed, to arrange with you about the count's funeral."

These words had the effect of a cold shower-bath on M. Casimir. "Upon my word, I had forgotten—forgotten entirely, upon my word!" And the thought of his condition, and the responsibility he had accepted, coming upon him at the same time, he continued: "Good Heavens! I'm in a nice state! It is all I can do to stand. What will they think at the house? What will they say?"

M. Fortunat had drawn his clerk a little on one side. "Victor," said he, quickly and earnestly, "I must go at once. Everything has been paid for; but in case you need some money for a cab or anything of the sort, here are ten francs. If there's any you don't use, keep it for yourself. I leave this fool in your charge; take care of him."

The sight of the ten franc piece made Chupin's face brighten a little. "Very well," he replied. "I understand the business. I served my apprenticeship as a 'guardian angel' when my grandmother kept the *Poivrière.*"*

"Above all, don't let him return home in his present state."

"Have no fears, monsieur, I must talk business with him, and so I shall have him all right in a jiffy." And as M. Fortunat made his escape, Chupin beckoned to the waiter, and said:

"Fetch me some very strong coffee, a handful of salt, and a lemon. There's nothing better for bringing a drunken man to his senses."

XV.

M. Fortunat left the restaurant, almost on the run, for he feared that he might be pursued and overtaken by M. Casimir. But after he had gone a couple of hundred paces, he paused, not so much to take breath, as to collect his scattered wits; and though the weather was cold, he seated himself on a bench to reflect.

Never in all his changeful life had he known such intense anxiety and torturing suspense as he had just experienced in that little room in the restaurant. He had longed for positive information and he had obtained it; but it had upset all his plans and annihilated all his hopes. Imagining that the count's heirs had been lost sight of, he had determined to find them and make a bargain with them, before they learned that they were worth their millions. But on the contrary, these heirs were close at hand, watching M. de Chalusse, and knowing their rights so well that they were ready to fight for them. "For it was certainly the count's sister who wrote the letter which I have in my pocket," he murmured. "Not wishing to receive him at her own home, she prudently appointed a meeting at a hotel. But what about this name of Huntley? Is it really hers, or is it only assumed for the occasion? Is it the name of the man who enticed her from home, or is it the name given to the son from whom she has separated herself?"

But after all what was the use of all these conjectures. There was but one certain and positive thing, and this was that the money he had counted upon had escaped him; and he experienced as acute a pang as if he had lost forty thousand francs a second time. Perhaps, at that moment, he was sorry that he had severed his connection with the marquis. Still, he was not the man to despond, however desperate his plight might appear, without an attempt to better his situation. He knew how many surprising and sudden changes in fortune have been brought about by some apparently trivial action. "I must discover this sister," he said to himself—"I must ascertain her position and her plans. If she has no one to advise her, I will offer my services; and who knows—"

A cab was passing; M. Fortunat hailed it, and ordered the Jehu to drive him to the Rue du Helder, No. 43, Hôtel de Homburg.

Was it by chance or premeditation that this establishment had received the name of one of the gambling dens of Europe? Perhaps the following information may serve to answer the question. The Hôtel de Homburg was one of those flash hostelries frequented by adventurers of distinction,

* See "Lecoq the Detective" by Emile Gaboriau.

who are attracted to Paris by the millions that are annually squandered there. Spurious counts and questionable Russian princesses were sure to find a cordial welcome three with princely luxury, moderate prices, and—but very little confidence. Each person was called by the title which it pleased him to give on his arrival—Excellency or Prince, according to his fancy. He could also find numerous servants carefully drilled to play the part of old family retainers, and carriages upon which the most elaborate coat-of-arms could be painted at an hour's notice. Nor was there any difficulty whatever in immediately procuring all the accessories of a life of grandeur—all that is needful to dazzle the unsuspecting, to throw dust in people's eyes, and to dupe one's chance acquaintances. All these things were provided without delay, by the month, by the day or by the hour, just as the applicant pleased. But there was no such thing as credit there. Bills were presented every evening, to those lodgers who did not pay in advance: and he who could not, or would not, settle the score, even if he were Excellency or Prince, was requested to depart at once, and his trunks were held as security.

When M. Fortunat entered the office of the hotel, a woman, with a crafty looking face, was holding a conference with an elderly gentleman, who had a black velvet skull-cap on his head, and a magnifying glass in his hand. They applied their eyes to the glass in turn, and were engaged in examining some very handsome diamonds, which had no doubt been offered in lieu of money by some noble but impecunious foreigner. On hearing M. Fortunat enter, the woman looked up.

"What do you desire, monsieur?" she inquired, politely.

"I wish to see Madame Lucy Huntley."

The woman did not reply at first, but raised her eyes to the ceiling, as if she were reading there the list of all the foreigners of distinction who honoured the Hôtel de Homburg by their presence at that moment. "Lucy Huntley!" she repeated. "I don't recollect that name! I don't think there's such a person in the house—Lucy Huntley! What kind of a person is she?"

For many reasons M. Fortunat could not answer. First of all, he did not know. But he was not in the least disconcerted, and he avoided the question without the slightest embarrassment, at the same time trying to quicken the woman's faulty memory. "The person I wished to see was here on Friday, between three and six in the afternoon; and she was waiting for a visitor with an anxiety which could not possibly have escaped your notice."

This detail quickened the memory of the man with the magnifying glass—none other than the woman's husband and landlord of the hotel. "Ah! the gentleman is speaking of the lady of No. 2—you remember—the same who insisted upon having the large private room."

"To be sure," replied the wife; "where could my wits have been!" And turning to M. Fortunat: "Excuse my forgetfulness," she added. "The lady is no longer in the house; she only remained here for a few hours."

This reply did not surprise M. Fortunat—he had expected it; and yet he assumed an air of the utmost consternation. "Only a few hours!" he repeated, like a despairing echo.

"Yes, monsieur. She arrived here about eleven o'clock in the morning, with only a large valise by way of luggage, and she left that same evening at eight o'clock."

"Alas! and where was she going?"

"She didn't tell me."

You might have sworn that M. Fortunat was about to burst into tears. "Poor Lucy!" said he, in a tragical tone; "it was for me, madame, that she was waiting. But it was only this morning that I received her letter appointing a meeting here. She must have been in despair. The post can't be depended on!"

The husband and wife simultaneously shrugged their shoulders, and the expression of their faces unmistakeably implied: "What can we do about it? It is no business of ours. Don't trouble us."

But M. Fortunat was not the man to be dismayed by such a trifle.

"She was taken to the railway station, no doubt," he insisted.

"Really, I know nothing about it."

"You told me just now that she had a large valise, so she could not have left your hotel on foot. She must have asked for a vehicle. Who was sent to fetch it? One of your boys? If I could find the driver I should, perhaps, be able to obtain some valuable information from him."

The husband and wife exchanged a whole volume of suspicions in a single glance. M. Isidore Fortunat's appearance was incontestably respectable, but they were well aware that those strange men styled detectives are perfectly conversant with the art of dressing to perfection. So the hotel-keeper quickly decided on his course. "Your idea is an excellent one," he said to M. Fortunat. "This lady must certainly have taken a vehicle on leaving; and what is more, it must have been a vehicle belonging to the hotel. If you will follow me, we will make some inquiries on the subject."

And rising with a willingness that augured well for their success, he led the agent into the courtyard, where five or six vehicles were stationed, while the drivers lounged on a bench, chatting and smoking their pipes. "Which of you was employed by a lady yesterday evening at about eight o'clock?"

"What sort of a person was she?"

"She was a handsome woman, between thirty and forty years' old, very fair, rather stout, and dressed in black. She had a large Russia-leather travelling-bag."

"I took her," answered one of the drivers promptly.

M. Fortunat advanced towards the man with open arms, and with such eagerness that it might have been supposed he meant to embrace him. "Ah, my worthy fellow!" he exclaimed, "you can save my life!"

The driver looked exceedingly pleased. He was thinking that this gentleman would certainly requite his salvation by a magnificent gratuity. "What do you want of me?" he asked.

"Tell me where you drove this lady?"

"I took her to the Rue de Berry."

"To what number?"

"Ah, I can't tell. I've forgotten it."

But M. Fortunat no longer felt any anxiety. "Very good," said he. "You've forgotten it—that's not at all strange. But you would know the house again, wouldn't you?"

"Undoubtedly I should."

"Will you take me there?"

"Certainly, sir. This is my vehicle."

The hunter of missing heirs at once climbed inside; but it was not

until the carriage had left the courtyard that the landlord returned to his office. "That man must be a detective," he remarked to his wife.

"So I fancy."

"It's strange we're not acquainted with him. He must be a new member of the force."

But M. Fortunat was quite indifferent as to what impression he had left behind him at the Hôtel de Homburg, for he never expected to set foot there again. The one essential thing was that he had obtained the information he wished for, and even a description of the lady, and he felt that he was now really on the track. The vehicle soon reached the Rue de Berry, and drew up in front of a charming little private house. "Here we are, monsieur," said the driver, bowing at the door.

M. Fortunat sprang nimbly on to the pavement, and handed five francs to the coachman, who went off growling and swearing, for he thought the reward a contemptibly small one, coming as it did from a man whose life had been saved, according to his own confession. However, the person the Jehu anathematized certainly did not hear him. Standing motionless where he had alighted, M. Fortunat scrutinized the house in front of him with close attention. "So she lives here," he muttered. "This is the place; but I can't present myself without knowing her name. I must make some inquiries."

There was a wine-shop some fifty paces distant, and thither M. Fortunat hastened, and ordered a glass of currant syrup. As he slowly sipped the beverage, he pointed to the house in question, with an air of well-assumed indifference, and asked: "Whom does that pretty dwelling belong to?"

"To Madame Lia d'Argelès," answered the landlady.

M. Fortunat started. He well remembered that this was the name the Marquis de Valorsay had mentioned when speaking of the vile conspiracy he had planned. It was at this woman's house that the man whom Mademoiselle Marguerite loved had been disgraced! Still he managed to master his surprise, and in a light, frank tone he resumed: "What a pretty name! And what does this lady do?"

"What does she do? Why, she amuses herself."

M. Fortunat seemed astonished. "Dash it!" said he. "She must amuse herself to good purpose to have a house like that. Is she pretty?"

"That depends on taste. She's no longer young, at any rate; but she has superb golden hair. And, oh! how white she is—as white as snow, monsieur—as white as snow! She has a fine figure as well, and a most distinguished bearing—pays cash, too, to the very last farthing."

There could no longer be any doubt. The portrait sketched by the wine-vendor fully corresponded with the description given by the hotelkeeper in the Rue de Helder. Accordingly, M. Fortunat drained his glass, and threw fifty centimes on the counter. Then, crossing the street, he boldly rang at the door of Madame d'Argelès' house. If any one had asked him what he proposed doing and saying if he succeeded in effecting an entrance, he might have replied, with perfect sincerity, "I don't know." The fact is, he had but one aim, one settled purpose in his mind. He was obstinately, *furiously* resolved to derive some benefit, small or great, from this mysterious affair. As for the means of execution, he relied entirely on his audacity and *sang-froid*, convinced that they would not fail him when the decisive moment came. "First of all, I must see this lady," he said to himself. "The first words will depend solely upon my first impressions. After that, I shall be guided by circumstances."

An old serving-man, in a quiet tasteful livery, opened the door, whereupon M. Fortunat, in a tone of authority, asked—"Madame Lia d'Argelès?"

"Madame does not receive on Friday," was the reply.

With a petulant gesture, M. Fortunat rejoined: "All the same, I must speak with her to-day. It is on a matter of the greatest importance. Give her my card." So saying, he held out a bit of paste-board, on which, below his name, were inscribed the words: "Liquidations. Settlements effected for insolvent parties."

"Ah! that's a different thing," said the servant. "Will monsieur take the trouble to follow me?"

M. Fortunat did take the trouble; and he was conducted into a large drawing-room where he was requested to sit down and await madame's coming. Left to himself, he began an inventory of the apartment, as a general studies the ground on which he is about to give battle. No trace remained of the unfortunate scene of the previous night, save a broken candelabrum on the chimney-piece. It was the one which Pascal Ferailleur had armed himself with, when they talked of searching him, and which he had thrown down in the courtyard, as he left the house. But this detail did not attract M. Fortunat's attention. The only thing that puzzled him was the large reflector placed above the chandelier, and it took him some time to fathom with what object it was placed there. Whithout precisely intimidating him, the luxurious appointments of the house aroused his astonishment. "Everything here is in princely style," he muttered, "and this shows that all the lunatics are not at Charenton yet. If Madame d'Argelès lacked bread in days gone by, she does so no longer—that's evident."

Naturally enough this reflection led him to wonder why such a rich woman should become the Marquis de Valorsay's accomplice, and lend a hand in so vile and cowardly a plot, which horrified even him—Fortunat. "For she must be an accomplice," he thought.

And he marvelled at the freak of fate which had connected the unfortunate man who had been sacrificed with the unacknowledged daughter, and the cast-off sister, of the Count de Chalusse. A vague presentiment, the mysterious voice of instinct, warned him, moreover, that his profit in the affair would depend upon the antagonism, or alliance, of Mademoiselle Marguerite and Madame d'Argelès. But his meditations were suddenly interrupted by the sound of a discussion in an adjoining room. He stepped eagerly forward, hoping to hear something, and he did hear a man saying in a coarse voice: "What! I leave an interesting game, and lose precious time in coming to offer you my services, and you receive me like this! Zounds! madame, this will teach me not to meddle with what doesn't concern me, in future. So, good-bye, my dear lady. You'll learn some day, to your cost, the real nature of this villain of a Coralth whom you now defend so warmly."

This name of Coralth was also one of those which were engraven upon M. Fortunat's memory; and yet he did not notice it at the moment. His attention was so absorbed by what he had just heard that he could not fix his mind upon the object of his mission; and he only abandoned his conjectures on hearing a rustling of skirts against the panels of the door leading into the hall.

The next moment Madame Lia d'Argelès entered the room. She was arrayed in a very elegant dressing-gown of grey cashmere, with blue satin trimmings, her hair was beautifully arranged, and she had neglected none of

the usual artifices of the toilette-table; still any one would have considered her to be over forty years of age. Her sad face wore an expression of melancholy resignation; and there were signs of recent tears in her swollen eyes, surrounded by bluish circles. She glanced at her visitor, and, in anything but an encouraging tone exclaimed: "You desired to speak with me, I believe?"

M. Fortunat bowed, almost disconcerted. He had expected to meet one of those stupid, ignorant, young women, who make themselves conspicuous at the afternoon promenade in the Bois de Boulogne; and he found himself in the presence of an evidently cultivated and imperious woman, who, even in her degradation, retained all her pride of race, and awed him, despite all his coolness and assurance. "I do, indeed, madame, wish to confer with you respecting some important interests," he answered.

She sank on to a chair; and, without asking her visitor to take a seat: "Explain yourself," she said, briefly.

M. Fortunat's knowledge of the importance of the game in which he had already risked so much had already restored his presence of mind. He had only needed a glance to form a true estimate of Madame d'Argelès' character; and he realised that it would require a sudden, powerful, and well-directed blow to shatter her composure. "I have the unpleasant duty of informing you of a great misfortune, madame," he began. "A person who is very dear to you, and who is nearly related to you, was a victim of a frightful accident yesterday evening, and died this morning."

This gloomy preamble did not seem to produce the slightest effect on Madame d'Argelès. "Whom are you speaking of?" she coldly asked.

M. Fortunat assumed his most solemn manner as he replied: "Of your brother, madame—of the Count de Chalusse."

She sprang up, and a convulsive shudder shook her from head to foot. "Raymond is dead!" she faltered.

"Alas! yes, madame. Struck with death at the very moment he was repairing to the appointment you had given him at the Hôtel de Homburg."

This clever falsehood, which was not entirely one, would, so the agent thought, be of advantage to him, since it would prove he was acquainted with previous events. But Madame d'Argelès did not seem to notice, or even to hear the remark. She had fallen back in her arm-chair, paler than death. "How did he die?" she asked.

"From an attack of apoplexy."

"My God!" exclaimed the wretched woman, who now suspected the truth, "my God, forgive me. It was my letter that killed him!" and she wept as if her heart were breaking—this woman who had suffered and wept so much.

It is needless to say that M. Fortunat was moved with sympathy; he always evinced a respectful sympathy for the woes of others; but, in the present instance, his emotion was greatly mitigated by the satisfaction he felt at having succeeded so quickly and so completely. Madame d'Argelès had confessed everything! This was indeed a victory, for it must be admitted that he had trembled lest she should deny all, and bid him leave the house. He still saw many difficulties between his pocket and the Count de Chalusse's money; but he did not despair of conquering them after such a successful beginning. And he was muttering some words of consolation, when Madame d'Argelès suddenly looked up and said: "I must see him—I will see him once more! Come, monsieur!" But a terrible memory

rooted her to the spot and with a despairing gesture, and in a voice quivering with anguish she exclaimed:

"No, no—I cannot even do that."

M. Fortunat was not a little disturbed: and it was with a look of something very like consternation that he glanced at Madame d'Argelès, who had reseated herself and was now sobbing violently, with her face hidden on the arm of her chair. "What prevents her?" he thought. "Why this sudden terror now that her brother is dead? Is she unwilling to confess that she is a Chalusse? She must make up her mind to it, however, if she wishes to receive the count's property—and she must make up her mind to it, for my sake, if not for her own."

He remained silent, until it seemed to him that Madame d'Argelès was calmer, then: "Excuse me, madame," he began, "for breaking in upon your very natural grief, but duty requires me to remind you of your interests."

With the passive docility of those who are wretched, she wiped away her tears, and replied, gently: "I am listening, monsieur."

He had had time to prepare his discourse. "First of all, madame," he remarked, "I must tell you that I was the count's confidential agent. In him I lose a protector. Respect alone prevents me from saying a friend. He had no secrets from me." M. Fortunat saw so plainly that Madame d'Argelès did not understand a word of this sentimental exordium that he thought it necessary to add: "I tell you this, not so much to gain your consideration and good-will, as to explain to you how I became acquainted with these matters relating to your family—how I became aware of your existence, for instance, which no one else suspected." He paused, hoping for some reply, a word, a sign, but not receiving this encouragement, he continued: "I must, first of all, call your attention to the peculiar situation of M. de Chalusse, and to the circumstances which immediately preceded and attended his departure from life. His death was so unexpected that he was unable to make any disposition of his property by will, or even to indicate his last wishes. This, madame, is fortunate for you. M. de Chalusse had certain prejudices against you, as you are aware. Poor count. He certainly had the best heart in the world, and yet hatred with him was almost barbaric in its intensity. There can be no doubt whatever, that he had determined to deprive you of your inheritance. With this intention he had already begun to convert his estates into ready money, and had he lived six months longer you would not have received a penny."

With a gesture of indifference, which was difficult to explain after the vehemence and the threatening tone of her letter, Madame d'Argelès murmured:

"Ah, well! what does it matter?"

"What does it matter?" repeated M. Fortunat. "I see, madame, that your grief prevents you from realising the extent of the peril you have escaped. M. de Chalusse had other, and more powerful reasons even than his hatred for wishing to deprive you of your share of his property. He had sworn that he would give a princely fortune to his beloved daughter."

For the first time, Madame d'Argelès' features assumed an expression of surprise. "What, my brother had a child?"

"Yes, madame, an illegitimate daughter, Mademoiselle Marguerite, a lovely and charming girl whom I had the pleasure of restoring to his care some years ago. She has been living with him for six months or so; and he was about to marry her, with an enormous dowry, to a nobleman bearing one of the proudest names in France, the Marquis de Valorsay."

This name shook Madame d'Argelès as if she had experienced the shock of an electric battery, and springing to her feet, with flashing eyes: "You say that my brother's daughter was to marry M. de Valorsay?" she asked.

"It was decided—the marquis adored her."

"But she—she did not love him—confess that she did not love him."

M. Fortunat did not know what to reply. The question took him completely by surprise; and feeling that his answer would have a very considerable influence upon what might follow, he hesitated.

"Will you answer me," insisted Madame d'Argelès, imperiously. "She loved another, did she not?"

"To tell the truth, I believe she did," the agent stammered. "But I have no proof of it, madame."

"Ah! the wretch!" she exclaimed with a threatening gesture, "the traitor! the infamous scoundrel! Now, I understand it all. And to think that it occurred in *my* house. But no; it was best so, I can still repair everything." And darting to the bell-rope, she pulled it violently.

A servant at once appeared. "Job," she said, "hasten after Baron Trigault—he left the house a moment ago—and bring him back. I must speak with him. If you do not overtake him, go to his club, to his house, to the houses of his friends, go to every place where there is any chance of finding him. Make haste, and do not return without him."

And as the man turned to obey, she added: "My carriage must be in the courtyard. Take it."

Meanwhile M. Fortunat's expression of countenance had undergone a marked change. "Well!" thought he, "I have just made a mess of it! M. Valorsay is unmasked; and now, may I be hung, if he ever marries Mademoiselle Marguerite. Certainly, I do not owe much to the scoundrel, for he has defrauded me of forty thousand francs, but what will he say when he discovers what I've done? He will never believe me if I tell him that it was an involuntary blunder, and Heaven only knows what revenge he will plan! A man of his disposition, knowing that he is ruined, is capable of anything! So much the worse for me. Before night I shall warn the commissary of police in my district, and I shall not go out unarmed!"

The servant went off, and Madame d'Argelès then turned to her visitor again. But she seemed literally transfigured by the storm of passion which was raging in her heart and mind; her cheeks were crimson, and an unwonted energy sparkled in her eyes. "Let us finish this business," she said, curtly; "I am expecting some one."

M. Fortunat bowed with a rather pompous, but at the same time obsequious air. "I have only a few more words to say," he declared. "M. de Chalusse having no other heir, I have come to acquaint you with your rights."

"Very good; continue, if you please."

"You have only to present yourself, and establish your identity, to be put in possession of your brother's property."

Madame d'Argelès gave the agent a look of mingled irony and distrust; and after a moment's reflection, she replied: "I am very grateful for your interest, monsieur; but if I have any rights, it is not my intention to urge them."

It seemed to M. Fortunat as if he were suddenly falling from some immense height. "You are not in earnest," he exclaimed, "or you are ignor

ant of the fact that M. de Chalusse leaves perhaps twenty millions behind him."

"My course is decided on, monsieur; irrevocably decided on."

"Very well, madame; but it often happens that the court institutes inquiries for the heirs of large fortunes, and this may happen in your case."

"I should reply that I was not a member of the Chalusse family, and that would end it. Startled by the news of my brother's death, I allowed my secret to escape me. I shall know how to keep it in future."

Anger succeeded astonishment in M. Fortunat's mind. "Madame, madame, what can you be thinking of?" he cried, impetuously. "Accept—in Heaven's name—accept this inheritance; if not for yourself, for the sake of—"

In his excitement, he was about to commit a terrible blunder. He saw it in time, and checked himself.

"For the sake of whom?" asked Madame d'Argelès, in an altered voice.

"For the sake of Mademoiselle Marguerite, madame; for the sake of this poor child, who is your niece. The count never having acknowledged her as his daughter, she will be left actually without bread, while her father's millions go to enrich the state."

"That will suffice, monsieur; I will think of it. And now, enough!"

The dismissal was so imperious that M. Fortunat bowed and went off, completely bewildered by this denouement. "She's crazy!" he said to himself. "Crazy in the fullest sense of the word. She refuses the count's millions from a silly fear of telling people that she belongs to the Chalusse family. She threatened her brother, but she would never have carried her threats into execution. And she prefers her present position to such a fortune. What lunacy!" But, although he was disappointed and angry, he did not by any means despair. "Fortunately for me," he thought, "this proud and haughty lady has a son somewhere in the world. And she'll do for him what she would not consent to do for herself. Through her, with a little patience and Victor Chupin's aid, I shall succeed in discovering this boy. He must be an intelligent youth—and we'll see if he surrenders his millions as easily as his mamma does."

XVI.

It is a terrible task to break suddenly with one's past, without even having had time for preparation; to renounce the life one has so far lived, to return to the starting point, and begin existence anew; to abandon everything—the position one has gained, the work one has become familiar with, every fondly cherished hope, and friend, and habit; to forsake the known to plunge into the unknown, to leave the certain for the uncertain, and desert light for darkness; to cast one's identity aside, assume a strange individuality, become a living lie, change name, position, face, and clothes—in one phrase to cease to be one's self, in order to become some one else.

This is, indeed, a terrible ordeal, and requires an amount of resolution and energy which few human beings possess. The boldest hesitate before such a sacrifice, and many a man has surrendered himself to justice rather than resort to this last extremity. And yet this was what Pascal Ferailleur had the courage to do, on the morrow of the shameful conspiracy that had deprived him of his good name. When his mother's exhortations and Baron Trigault's encouraging words had restored his wonted clearness of

perception, the only course he felt disposed to pursue was to disappear and fly from the storm of slander and contempt; and then, in a secure hiding-place, to watch for the time and opportunity of rehabilitation and revenge.

Madame Ferailleur and her son made all needful arrangements. "I shall start out at once," said Pascal, "and before two hours have elapsed I shall have found a modest lodging, where we must conceal ourselves for the present. I know a locality that will suit us, and where no one will certainly ever think of looking for us."

"And I," asked Madame Ferailleur, "what shall I do in the meantime?"

"You, mother; you must, at once, sell all that we possess here—everything—even my books. You will only keep such of our linen and clothes as you can pack in three or four trunks. We are undoubtedly watched; and so it is of the utmost importance that every one should imagine I have left Paris, and that you are going to join me."

"And when everything is sold, and my trunks are ready?"

"Then, mother, you must send some one for a cab, and order the driver to take you to the Western Railway Station, where you will have the trunks removed from the cab and placed in the baggage-room, as if you did not intend to leave Paris till the next day."

"Very good, I will do so; even if any one is watching us, he won't be likely to suspect this ruse. But afterwards?"

"Afterwards, mother, you must go to the waiting-room up-stairs, and youwill find me there. I will then take you to the rooms I shall have rented, and to-morrow we'll send a messenger with the receipt the railway people will give you, to fetch our luggage for us."

Madame Ferailleur approved of this plan, deeming herself fortunate in this great calamity that despair had not destroyed her son's energy and resources of mind. "Shall we retain our name, Pascal?"

"Oh, no. That would be an unpardonable imprudence."

"What name shall we take, then? I must know, for they may ask me at the station."

He reflected for a moment and then said: "We'll take your maiden name, mother. It will bring us good luck. Our new lodgings shall be hired in the name of the Widow Mauméjan."

They talked for some time longer, anxious to take every precaution that prudence could suggest. And when they were convinced that they had forgotten nothing, Madame Ferailleur suggested that Pascal should start off. But before doing so he had a sacred duty to perform. "I must warn Marguerite," he muttered. And seating himself at his desk, he wrote his beloved a concise and exact account of the events which had taken place. He told her of the course he intended to pursue; and promised her that she should know his new abode as soon as he knew it himself. In conclusion, he entreated her to grant him an interview, in which he could give her the full particulars of the affair and acquaint her with his hopes. As for exculpating himself, even by so much as a single word—as for explaining the snare he had been the victim of, the idea never once occurred to him. He was worthy of Mademoiselle Marguerite; he knew that not a doubt would disturb the perfect faith she had in his honour.

Leaning over her son's shoulder, Madame Ferailleur read what he had written. "Do you intend to trust this letter to the post?" she inquired. "Are you sure, perfectly sure, that it will reach Mademoiselle Marguerite, and not some one else who might use it against you?"

Pascal shook his head. "I know how to ensure its safe receipt," he replied. "Some time ago, Marguerite told me that if ever any great peril threatened us, I might call for the housekeeper at the Chalusse mansion and intrust my message to her. The danger is sufficiently great to justify such a course in the present instance. So I shall pass down the Rue de Courcelles, ask to see Madame Léon, and give her this letter. Have no fear, my dear mother."

As he spoke, he began to pack all the legal documents which had been confided to him into a large box, which was to be carried to one of his former friends, who would distribute the papers among the people they belonged to. He next made a small bundle of the few important private papers and valuables he possessed; and then, ready for the sacrifice, he took a last survey of the pleasant home where success had smiled so favourably upon his efforts, where he had been so happy, and where he had cherished such bright dreams of the future. Overcome by a flood of recollections, the tears sprang to his eyes. He embraced his mother, and fled precipitately from the house.

"Poor child!" murmured Madame Ferailleur; "poor Pascal!"

Was she not also to be pitied? This was the second time within twenty years that a thunderbolt had fallen on her in the full sunlight of happiness. And yet now, as on the day following her husband's death, she found in her heart the robust energy and heroic maternal constancy which enable one to rise above every misfortune. It was in a firm voice that she ordered her servant to go in search of the nearest furniture dealer, no matter which, provided he would pay cash. And when the man arrived she showed him through the rooms with stoical calmness. God alone knew how intensely she was suffering. And yet whilst she was waiting for the dealer, each piece of furniture had acquired an extraordinary value in her eyes. It seemed to her as if each object were a part of herself, and when the man turned and twisted a chair or a table she almost considered it a personal affront.

The rich, who are accustomed from birth to the luxury that surrounds them, are ignorant of the terrible sufferings which attend such cases as these. The persons who do suffer are those of the middle classes, not the *parvenus*, but those who bid fair to become *parvenus* when misfortune overtook them. Their hearts bleed when inexorable necessity deprives them of all the little comforts with which they had gradually surrounded themselves, for there is not an object that does not recall a long ungratified desire, and the almost infantile joy of possession. What happiness they felt on the day when they purchased that large arm-chair! How many times they had gone to admire those velvet curtains in the shop-windows before buying them! Those carpets represented months of self-denial. And that pretty clock—ah! they had fancied it would only herald the flight of prosperous and pleasant hours. And all these things the dealer handles, and shakes, and jeers at, and depreciates. He will scarcely condescend to purchase. Who would care to buy such trash? He knows that the owner is in need of money, and he profits by this knowledge. It is his business. "How much did this cost you?" he asks, as he inspects one piece of furniture after another.

"So much."

"Well, you must have been terribly cheated."

You know very well that if there is a cheat in the world, it is this same man; but what can you say? Any other dealer you might send for would act in the same way. Now, Madame Ferailleur's furniture had cost some ten thousand francs; and, although it was no longer new, it was worth at

least a third of that sum. But she obtained only seven hundred and sixty francs for it. It is true, however, that she was in haste, and that she was paid cash.

Nine o'clock was striking when her trunks were at last piled on a cab, and she called out to the driver "Take me to the Place du Havre—to the railway station." Once before, when defrauded by a scoundrel, she had been obliged to part with all her household treasures. Once before she had left her home, taking merely the wreck of her fortune with her. But what a difference between then and now!

Then, the esteem and sympathy of all who knew her was hers, and the admiring praise she received divested the sacrifice of much of its bitterness, and increased her courage two-fold. Now, she was flying secretly, and alone, under an assumed name, trembling at the thought of pursuit or recognition—flying as a criminal flies at thought of his crime, and fear of punishment. She had far less suffered on the day, when, with her son upon her knees, she journeyed to the cemetery, following all that was mortal of the man who had been her only thought, her love, her pride, her happiness, and hope. Though crushed by the sense of her irreparable loss, she had not rebelled against the hand that struck her; but now it was human wickedness that assailed her through her son, and her suffering was like that of the innocent man who perishes for want of power to prove his innocence. Her husband's death had not caused her such bitter tears as her son's dishonour. She who was so proud, and who had such good reason to be proud, she could note the glances of scorn she was favoured with as she left her home. She heard the insulting remarks made by some of her neighbours, who, like so many folks, found their chief delight in other people's misfortunes.

"Crocodile tears," some had exclaimed. "She is going to meet her son; and with what he has stolen they will live like princes in America." Rumour, which enlarges and misrepresents everything, had indeed, absurdly exaggerated the affair at Madame d'Argelès' house. It was reported in the Rue d'Ulm that Pascal had spent every night at the gaming table for more than five years; and that, being an incomparable trickster, he had stolen millions.

Meanwhile, Madame Ferailleur was approaching the station. The cab horse soon slackened its pace to climb the acclivity of the Rue d'Amsterdam; and shortly afterwards the vehicle drew up in the courtyard of the railway station. Faithfully observing the directions which had been given her, the worthy woman had her trunks taken to the baggage-room, declaring that she should not leave Paris until the next day, whereupon she received a receipt from the man in charge of the room. She was oppressed by vague apprehensions, and looked closely at every one who passed her; fearing the presence of spies, and knowing full well that the most profound secrecy could alone ensure the success of Pascal's plans. However she did not see a single suspicious looking person. Some Englishmen—those strange travellers, who are at the same time so foolishly prodigal and so ridiculously miserly—were making a great hue and cry over the four sous gratuity claimed by a poor commissionaire; but these were the only persons in sight.

Partially reassured, Madame Ferailleur hastily ascended the staircase, and entered the large waiting-room. It was here that Pascal had promised to meet her; but, though she looked round on all sides, she did not perceive him. Still, this delay did not alarm her much; nor was it at all strange, since Pascal had scarcely known what he would have to do when he left the

house. She seated herself on a bench, as far back in the shade as possible and gazed sadly at the ever-changing throng, when all of a sudden she was startled by a man, who abruptly paused in front of her. This man proved to be Pascal. But his hair had been closely cut, and he had shaved off his beard. And thus shorn, with his smooth face, and with a brown silk neckerchief in lieu of the white muslin tie he usually wore, he was so greatly changed that for an instant his own mother did not recognise him.

"Well?" asked Madame Ferailleur, as she realised his identity.

"I have succeeded. We have secured such rooms as I wished for."

"Where?"

"Ah!—a long way off, my poor mother—many a league from those we have known and loved—in a thinly populated part of the suburbs, on the Route de la Révolte, just outside the fortifications, and almost at the point where it intersects the Asnières road. You will not be very comfortable there, but you will have the pleasure of a little garden."

She rose, summoning all her energy. "What does it matter where or what our abode is?" she interrupted, with forced gaiety. "I am confident that we shall not remain there long."

But it seemed as if her son did not share her hopes, for he remained silent and dejected; and as his mother observed him closely, she fancied by the expression of his eyes, that some new anxiety had been added to all his other troubles.

"What is the matter?" she inquired, unable to master her alarm—"what has happened?"

"Ah! a great misfortune!"

"My God! still another?"

"I have been to the Rue de Courcelles; and I have spoken to Madame Léon."

"What did she say?"

"The Count de Chalusse died this morning."

Madame Ferailleur drew a long breath, as if greatly relieved. She was certainly expecting to hear something very different, and she did not understand why this death should be a great misfortune to them personally. One point, however, she did realise, that it was imprudent, and even dangerous to carry on this conversation in a hall where a hundred persons were passing and re-passing every minute. So she took her son's arm, and led him away, saying: "Come, let us go."

Pascal had kept the cab which he had been using during the afternoon; and having installed his mother inside, he got in himself, and gave his new address to the driver. "Now tell me all," said Madame Ferailleur.

Poor Pascal was in that state of mind in which it costs one actual suffering to talk; but he wished to mitigate his mother's anxiety as much as possible; and moreover, he did not like her to suppose him wanting in endurance. So, with a powerful effort, he shook off the lethargy that was creeping over him, and in a voice loud enough to be heard above the noise oft he carriage wheels, he began: "This is what I have done, mother, since I left you. I remembered that some time ago, while I was appraising some property, I had seen three or four houses on the Route de la Révolte, admirably suited to our present wants. Naturally I went there first. A suite of rooms was vacant in one of these houses. I have taken it; and in order that nothing may interfere with the liberty of my movements, I have paid six months' rent in advance. Here is the receipt, drawn up in the name we shall henceforth bear." So saying, he showed his mother a document

in which the landlord declared that he had received from M. Mauméjan the sum of three hundred and fifty francs for two quarters rent, etc. "My bargain concluded," he resumed, "I returned into Paris, and entered the first furniture shop I saw. I meant to hire the necessary things to furnish our little home, but the dealer made all sorts of objections. He trembled for his furniture, he wanted a sum of money to be deposited as security, or the guarantee of three responsible business men. Seeing this, and knowing that I had no time to lose, I preferred to purchase such articles as were absolutely necessary. One of the conditions of the purchase was that everything should be in the house and in its place by eleven o'clock to-night. As I stipulated in writing that the dealer should forfeit three hundred francs in case he failed to fulfill his agreement, I can rely upon his punctuality; I confided the key of our lodgings to him, and he must now be there waiting for us."

So, before thinking of his love, and Mademoiselle Marguerite, Pascal had taken the necessary measures for the execution of his plan to regain his lost honour. Madame Ferailleur had scarcely supposed him capable of so much courage and firmness, and she rewarded him with a warm pressure of the hand. Then, as he was silent: "When did you see Madame Léon, then?" she asked.

"When all the household arrangements were completed, mother. On leaving the furniture-shop, I found that I had still an hour and a quarter before me. I could defer no longer, and at the risk of obliging you to wait for me, I hastened to the Rue de Courcelles."

It was evident that Pascal felt extreme embarrassment in speaking of Mademoiselle Marguerite. There is an instinctive delicacy and dislike of publicity in all deep passion, and true and chaste love is ever averse to laying aside the veil with which it conceals itself from the inquisitive. Madame Ferailleur understood this feeling; but she was a mother, and as such, jealous of her son's tenderness, and anxious for particulars concerning this rival who had suddenly usurped her place in the heart where she had long reigned supreme. She was also a woman—that is to say, distrustful and suspicious in reference to all other women. So, without taking pity on Pascal's embarrassment, she urged him to continue.

"I gave the driver five francs on condition that he would hurry his horses," he resumed, "and we were rattling along at a rapid rate, when, suddenly, near the Hôtel de Chalusse, I noticed a change in the motion of the vehicle. I looked out and saw that we were driving over a thick layer of straw which had been spread across the street. I can scarcely describe my feelings on seeing this. A cold perspiration came over me—I fancied I saw Marguerite in agony, dying—far from me, and calling me in vain. Without waiting for the vehicle to stop, I sprang to the ground, and was obliged to exercise all my self-control to prevent myself from rushing into the concierge's lodge, and wildly asking: 'Who is dying here?' But an unforeseen difficulty presented itself. It was evident that I ought not to go in person to inquire for Madame Léon. Whom could I send? There were no commissionaires at the street corners, and nothing would have induced me to confide the message to any of the lads in the neighbouring wine-shops. Fortunately, my driver—the same who is driving us now—is an obliging fellow, and I intrusted him with the commission, while I stood guard over his horses. Ten minutes later, Madame Léon left the house and came to meet me. I knew her at once, for I had seen her a hundred times with Marguerite when they lived near the Luxembourg; and having seen me pass

and repass so often, she recognized me in spite of my changed appearance. Her first words, 'M. de Chalusse is dead,' relieved my heart of a terrible weight. I could breathe again. But she was in such haste that she could not stop to tell me any particulars. Still I gave her my letter, and she promised me a prompt reply from Marguerite. Everybody will be up and moving about the house to-night, and she said she could easily make her escape for a few moments. So, at half-past twelve to-night she will be at the little garden-gate, and if I am promptly at hand, I shall have a reply from Marguerite."

Madame Ferailleur seemed to be expecting something more, and as Pascal remained silent, she remarked: "You spoke of a great misfortune. In what does it consist? I do not perceive it."

With an almost threatening gesture, and in a gloomy voice, he answered: "The misfortune is this: if it had not been for this abominable conspiracy, which has dishonoured me, Marguerite would have been my wife before a month had elapsed, for now she is free, absolutely free to obey the dictates of her own will and heart."

"Then why do you complain?"

"Oh, mother! don't you understand? How can I marry her? Would it be right for me to think of offering her a dishonoured name? It seems to me that I should be guilty of a most contemptible act—of something even worse than a crime—if I dared speak to her of my love and our future before I have crushed the villains who have ruined me."

Regret, anger, and the consciousness of his present po verlessness drew from him tears which fell upon Madame Ferailleur's heart like molten lead; but she succeeded in concealing her agony. "All the more reason," she answered, almost coldly, "why you should not lose a second, but devote all your energy and intelligence to the work of justification."

"Oh, I shall have my revenge, never fear. But in the meantime, what is to become of *her?* Think, mother, she is alone in the world, without a single friend. It is enough to drive one mad!"

"She loves you, you tell me. What have you to fear? Now she will be freed from the persecutions of the suitor they intended to force upon her, whom she has spoken to you about—the Marquis de Valorsay, is it not?"

This name sent Pascal's blood to his brain. "Ah, the scoundrel!" he exclaimed. "If there was a God in heaven—"

"Wretched boy!" interrupted Madame Ferailleur, "you blaspheme when Providence has already interposed on your behalf. And who suffers most at this moment, do you think?—you, strong in your innocence, or the marquis, who realizes that he has committed an infamous crime in vain?"

The sudden stopping of the cab put an end to their conversation. Leaving the Route d'Asnières, the driver had turned into the Route de la Révolte, and had drawn up in front of an unpretentious two-storeyed house which stood entirely alone. "We have arrived, mother," said Pascal.

A man, who was standing on the threshold, stepped forward to open the cab-door. It was the furniture-dealer. "Here you are at last, M. Mauméjan," said he. "Come in, and you'll see that I've strictly fulfilled the conditions of our contract." His words proved true. He was paid the sum stipulated, and went away satisfied.

"Now, my dear mother," said Pascal, "allow me to do the honours of the poor abode I have selected."

He had taken only the ground floor of this humble dwelling. The storey above, which had an independent entrance and staircase, was occupied by

the quiet family of the owner. Although the space was small, the architect had made the most of it. He had divided it into four small rooms, separated by a corridor; and the kitchen looked out upon a little garden about four times as large as an ordinary sheet. The furniture which Pascal had purchased was more than plain; but it was well suited to this humble abode. It had just been brought in, but any one would have supposed it had been in its place for a couple of years.

"We shall be very comfortable here," declared Madame Ferailleur.

"Yes, very comfortable. By to-morrow evening you won't recognize the place. I have saved a few trifles from the wreck—some curtains, a couple of lamps, a clock—you'll see. It's wonderful how much four trunks can be made to hold."

When his mother set him such a noble example Pascal would have blushed to allow himself to be outdone. He very quietly explained the reasons which had influenced him in choosing these rooms, the principal one being that there was no concierge, and he was therefore assured absolute liberty in his movements, as well as entire immunity from indiscreet gossip.

"Certainly, my dear mother," he added, "it is a lonely and unattractive neighbourhood; but you will find all the necessaries of life near at hand. The owner of the house lives on the floor above. I have talked with the wife—they seem to be honest, quiet people—and she will pilot you about. I inquired for some one to do the heavy work, and she mentioned a poor woman named Vantrasson, who lives in the neighbourhood, and who is anxious to obtain employment. They were to inform her this evening, and you will see her to-morrow. And above all, don't forget that you are henceforth Madame Mauméjan."

Occupied with these arrangements for the future, he was still talking, when Madame Ferailleur, drawing out her watch, gently remarked: "And your appointment? You forget that the cab is waiting at the door."

It was true; he had forgotten it. He caught up his hat, hastily embraced his mother, and sprang into the vehicle. The horses were almost exhausted, but the driver was so willing that he found a means of making them trot as far as the Rue de Courcelles. However, on arriving there, he declared that his animals and himself could endure no more, and after receiving the amount due to him, he departed.

The air was chilly, the night dark, and the street deserted. The gloomy silence was only disturbed at long intervals by the opening or shutting of a door, or by the distant tread of some belated pedestrian. Having at least twenty minutes to wait, Pascal sat down on the curbstone opposite the Hôtel de Chalusse, and fixed his eyes upon the building as if he were striving to penetrate the massive walls, and see what was passing within. Only one window—that of the room where the dead man was lying—was lighted up, and he could vaguely distinguish the motionless form of a woman standing with her forehead pressed against the pane of glass. A prey to the indescribable agony which seizes a man when he feels that his life is at stake—that his future is about to be irrevocably decided—Pascal counted the seconds as they passed by. He found it impossible to reflect, to deliberate, to decide on any plan of action. He forgot the tortures he had endured during the last twenty-four hours; Coralth, Valorsay, Madame d'Argelès, the baron, no longer existed for him. He forgot his loss of honour and position, and the disgrace attached to his name. The past was annihilated, as it were, and he could think of no future beyond the next few moments. His physical condition undoubtedly contributed to his mental

weakness. He had taken no food that day, and he was faint from want of nourishment. He had come without an overcoat, moreover, and the cold night air chilled him to the bone. There was a strange ringing in his ears, and a mist swam before his eyes. At last the bell at the Beaujon Hospital tolled the appointed hour, and roused him from his lethargy. He seemed to hear a voice crying to him in the darkness, "Up! the hour has come!"

Trembling, and with tottering limbs, he dragged himself to the little gate opening into the gardens of the Chalusse mansion. Soon it softly opened, and Madame Léon appeared. Ah! it was not she that Pascal had hoped to see. Unfortunate man! He had been listening to that mysterious echo of our own desires which we so often mistake for a presentiment; and it had whispered in his heart: "Marguerite herself will come!"

With the candour of wretchedness, he could not refrain from telling Madame Léon the hope he had entertained. But, on hearing him, the housekeeper recoiled with a gesture of outraged propriety, and reproachfully exclaimed, "What are you thinking of, monsieur? What! could you suppose that Mademoiselle Marguerite would abandon her place by her dead father's bedside to come to a rendezvous? Ah! you should think better of her than that, the dear child!"

He sighed deeply, and in a scarcely audible voice, he asked: "Hasn't she even sent me a reply?"

"Yes, monsieur, she has; and although it is a great indiscretion on my part, I bring you the letter. Here it is. Now, good-evening. I must go at once. What would become of me if the servants discovered my absence, and found that I had gone out alone—"

She was hurrying away, but Pascal detained her. "Pray wait until I see what she has written," he said, imploringly. "I shall perhaps be obliged to send her some message in reply."

Madame Léon obeyed, though with rather bad grace, and not without several times repeating, "Make haste!"—while Pascal ran to a street lamp near by. It was not a letter that Marguerite had sent him, but a short note, written on a scrap of crumpled paper, folded, and not sealed. It was written in pencil; and the handwriting was irregular and indistinct. Still, by the flickering light of the gas, Pascal deciphered the word "Monsieur." It made him shudder. "Monsieur!" What did this mean? In writing to him of recent times, Marguerite had always said, "My dear Pascal," or, "My friend."

Nevertheless, he continued: "I have not had the courage to resist the entreaties made to me by the Count de Chalusse, my father, in his last agony. I have solemnly pledged myself to become the wife of the Marquis de Valorsay.

"One cannot break a promise made to the dying. I shall keep mine, even though my heart break. I shall do my duty. God will give me strength and courage. Forget her whom you loved. She is now the betrothed of another, and honour commands her to forget your very name. Once more, and for the last time, farewell! If you love me, you will not try to see me again. It would only add to my misery.

"Think as though she were dead—she who signs herself—MARGUERITE."

The commonplace wording of this letter, and the mistakes in spelling that marred it, entirely escaped Pascal's notice. He only understood one thing, that Marguerite was lost to him, and that she was on the point of becoming the wife of the vile scoundrel who had planned the snare which had ruined him at the Hôtel d'Argelès. Breathless, despairing, and half

crazed with rage, he sprang towards Madame Léon. "Marguerite, where is she?" he demanded, in a hoarse, unnatural voice; "I must see her!"

"Oh! monsieur, what do you ask? Is it possible? Allow me to explain to you—" But the housekeeper was unable to finish her sentence, for Pascal had caught her by the hands, and holding them in a vice-like grip, he repeated: "I must see Marguerite, and speak to her. I must tell her that she has been deceived; I will unmask the scoundrel who—"

The frightened housekeeper struggled with all her might, trying her best to reach the little gate which was standing open. "You hurt me!" she cried. "Are you mad? Let me go or I shall call for help!" And twice indeed she shouted in a loud voice, "Help! murder!"

But her cries were lost in the stillness of the night. If any one heard them, no one came; still they recalled Pascal to a sense of the situation, and he was ashamed of his violence. He released Madame Léon, and his manner suddenly became as humble as it had been threatening. "Excuse me,' he said, entreatingly. "I am suffering so much that I don't know what I'm doing. I beseech you to take me to Mademoiselle Marguerite, or else run and beg her to come here. I ask but a moment."

Madame Léon pretended to be listening attentively; but, in reality, she was quietly manœuvering to gain the garden gate. Soon she succeeded in doing so, whereupon, with marvellous strength and agility, she pushed Pascal away, and sprang inside the garden, closing the gate after her, and saying as she did so, "Begone, you scoundrel!"

This was the final blow; and for more than a minute Pascal stood motionless in front of the gate, stupefied with mingled rage and sorrow. His condition was not unlike that of a man who, after falling to the bottom of a precipice, is dragging himself up, all mangled and bleeding, swearing that he will yet save himself, when suddenly a heavy stone which he had loosened in his descent, falls forward and crushes him. All that he had so far endured was nothing in comparison with the thought that Valorsay would wed Marguerite. Was such a thing possible? Would God permit such a monstrous iniquity? "No, that shall never be," he muttered. "I will murder the scoundrel rather; and afterwards justice may do whatever it likes with me."

He experienced that implacable, merciless thirsting for vengeance which does not even recoil before the commission of a crime to secure satisfaction, and this longing inflamed him with such energy that, although he had been so utterly exhausted a few moments before—he was not half an hour in making his way back to his new home. His mother, who was waiting for him with an anxious heart, was surprised by the flush on his cheeks, and the light glittering in his eyes. "Ah, you bring good news," she exclaimed.

His only answer was to hand her the letter which Madame Léon had given him, saying as he did so, "Read."

Madame Ferailleur's eyes fell upon the words: "Once more, and for the last time, farewell!" She understood everything, turned very pale, and in a trembling voice exclaimed: "Don't grieve, my son; the girl did not love you."

"Oh, mother! if you knew—"

But she checked him with a gesture, and lifting her head proudly, she said: "I know what it is to love, Pascal—it is to have perfect faith. If the whole world had accused your father of a crime, would a single doubt of his innocence have ever entered my mind? This girl has doubted you. They have told her that you cheated at cards—and she has believed it.

You have failed to see that this oath at the bedside of the dying count is only an excuse."

It was true; the thought had not occurred to Pascal. "My God!" he cried in agony, "are you the only one who believes in my innocence?"

"Without proofs—yes. It must be your task to obtain these proofs."

"And I shall obtain them," he rejoined, in a tone of determination. "I am strong now that I have Marguerite's life to defend—for they have deceived her, mother, or she would never have given me up. Oh! don't shake your head. I love her, and so I trust her."

XVII.

M. Isidore Fortunat was not the man to go to sleep over a plan when it was once formed. Whenever he said to himself, "I'll do this, or that," he did it as soon as possible—that very evening, rather than the next day. Having sworn that he would find out Madame d'Argelès' son, the heir to the Count de Chalusse's millions, it did not take him long to decide which of his agents he would select to assist him in this difficult task. Thus his first care, on returning home, was to ask his book-keeper for Victor Chupin's address.

"He lives in the Faubourg Saint-Denis," replied the book-keeper, "at No. —."

"Very well," muttered M. Fortunat; "I'll go there as soon as I have eaten my dinner." And, indeed, as soon as he had swallowed his coffee, he requested Madame Dodelin to bring him his overcoat, and half an hour later he reached the door of the house where his clerk resided.

The house was one of those huge, ungainly structures, large enough to shelter the population of a small village, with three or four courtyards, as many staircases as there are letters in the alphabet, and a concierge who seldom remembers the names of the tenants except on quarter-days when he goes to collect the rent, and at New Year, when he expects a gratuity. But, by one of those lucky chances made expressly for M. Fortunat, the porter did recollect Chupin, knew him and was kindly disposed towards him, and so he told the visitor exactly how and where to find him. It was very simple. He had only to cross the first courtyard, take staircase D, on the left-hand side, ascend to the sixth floor, go straight ahead, &c., &c.

Thanks to this unusual civility, M. Fortunat did not lose his way more than five times before reaching the door upon which was fastened a bit of pasteboard bearing Victor Chupin's name. Noticing that a bell-rope hung beside the door, M. Fortunat pulled it, whereupon there was a tinkling, and a voice called out, "Come in!" He complied, and found himself in a small and cheaply-furnished room, which was, however, radiant with the cleanliness which is in itself a luxury. The waxed floor shone like a mirror; the furniture was brilliantly polished, and the counterpane and curtains of the bed were as white as snow. What first attracted the agent's attention was the number of superfluous articles scattered about the apartment—some plaster statuettes on either side of a gilt clock, an étagère crowded with knick-knacks, and five or six passable engravings. When he entered, Victor Chupin was sitting, in his shirt-sleeves, at a little table, where, by the light of a small lamp, and with a zeal that brought a flush to his cheeks, he was copying, in a very fair hand, a page from a French dictionary. Near the bed, in the shade, sat a poorly but neatly clad woman

about forty years of age, who was knitting industriously with some long wooden needles.

"M. Victor Chupin?" inquired M. Fortunat.

The sound of his voice made the young man spring to his feet. He quickly lifted the shade from his lamp, and, without attempting to conceal his astonishment, exclaimed: "M'sieur Fortunat!—at this hour! Where's the fire?" Then, in a grave manner that contrasted strangely with his accustomed levity: "Mother," said he, "this is one of my patrons, M'sieur Fortunat—you know—the gentleman whom I collect for."

The knitter rose, bowed respectfully, and said: "I hope, sir, that you are pleased with my son, and that he's honest."

"Certainly, madame," replied the agent; "certainly. Victor is one of my best and most reliable clerks."

"Then I'm content," said the woman, re-seating herself.

Chupin also seemed delighted. "This is my good mother, sir," said he. "She's almost blind now; but, in less than six months, she will be able to stand at her window and see a pin in the middle of the street, so the physician who is treating her eyes promised me; then we shall be all right again. But take a seat, sir. May we venture to offer you anything?"

Although his clerk had more than once alluded to his responsibilities, M. Fortunat was amazed. He marvelled at the perfume of honesty which exhaled from these poor people, at the dignity of this humble woman, and at the protecting and respectful affection evinced by her son—a young man, whose usual tone of voice and general behaviour had seemed to indicate that he was decidedly a scapegrace. "Thanks, Victor," he replied, "I won't take any refreshment. I've just left the dinner-table. I've come to give you my instructions respecting a very important and very urgent matter."

Chupin at once understood that his employer wished for a private interview. Accordingly, he took up the lamp, opened a door, and, in the pompous tone of a rich banker who is inviting some important personage to enter his private room, he said: "Will you be kind enough to step into my chamber, m'sieur?"

The room which Chupin so emphatically denominated his "chamber" was a tiny nook, extraordinarily clean, it is true, but scantily furnished with a small iron bedstead, a trunk, and a chair. He offered the chair to his visitor, placed the lamp on the trunk, and seated himself on the bed, saying, as he did so: "This is scarcely on so grand a scale as your establishment, m'sieur; but I am going to ask the landlord to gild the window of my snuff-box."

M. Fortunat was positively touched. He held out his hand to his clerk and exclaimed: "You're a worthy fellow, Chupin."

"Nonsense, m'sieur, one does what one can; but, zounds! how hard it is to make money honestly! If my good mother could only see, she would help me famously, for there is no one like her for work! But you see one can't become a millionaire by knitting!"

"Doesn't your father live with you?"

Chupin's eyes gleamed angrily. "Ah! don't speak of that man to me, m'sieur!" he exclaimed, "or I shall hurt somebody." And then, as if he felt it necessary to explain and excuse his vindictive exclamation, he added, "My father, Polyte Chupin, is a good-for-nothing scamp. And yet he's had his opportunities. First, he was fortunate enough to find a wife like my mother, who is honesty itself—so much so that she was called Toinon

the Virtuous when she was young. She idolized him, and nearly killed herself by working to earn money for him. And yet he abused her so much, and made her weep so much, that she has become blind. But that's not all. One morning there came to him—I don't know whence or how—enough money for him to have lived like a gentleman. I believe it was a munificent reward for some service he had rendered a great nobleman at the time when my grandmother, who is now dead, kept a dramshop called the Poivrière. Any other man would have treasured that money, but not he. What he did was to carouse day and night, and all the while my poor mother was working her fingers to the bone to earn food for me. She never saw a penny of all his money; and, indeed, once when she asked him to pay the rent, he beat her so cruelly that she was laid up in bed for a week. However, monsieur, you can very readily understand that when a man leads that kind of a life, he speedily comes to the end of his banking account. So my father was soon without a penny in his purse, and then he was obliged to work in order to get something to eat, and this didn't suit him at all. But when he didn't know where to find a crust he remembered us; he sought us out, and found us. Once I lent him a hundred sous; the next day he came for forty more, and the next for three francs; then for five francs again. And so it was every day; 'Give me this, or give me that!' At last I said, 'Enough of this, the bank's closed!' Then, what do you think he did? He watched the house until he saw me go out; then he came in with a second-hand furniture-dealer, and tried to sell everything, pretending that he was the master. And my poor, dear mother would have allowed him to do it. Fortunately, I happened to come in again. Let him sell my furniture? Not I. I would sooner have been chopped in pieces! I went and complained to the commissary of police, who made my father leave the house, and since then we've lived in peace."

Certainly this was more than sufficient to explain and excuse Victor Chupin's indignation. And yet he had prudently withheld the most serious and important cause of his dislike. What he refrained from telling was that years before, when he was still a mere child, without will or discernment, his father had taken him from his mother, and had started him down that terrible descent, which inevitably leads one to prison or the gallows, unless there be an almost miraculous interposition on one's behalf. This miracle had occurred in Chupin's case; but he did not boast of it.

"Come, come!" said M. Fortunat, "don't worry too much about it. A father's a father after all, and yours will undoubtedly reform by and by."

He said this as he would have said anything else, out of politeness and for the sake of testifying a friendly interest; but he really cared no more for this information concerning the Chupin family than the grand Turk. His first emotion had quickly vanished; and he was beginning to find these confidential disclosures rather wearisome. "Let us get back to business," he remarked; "that is to say, to Casimir. What did you do with the fool after my departure?"

"First, monsieur, I sobered him; which was no easy task. The greedy idiot had converted himself into a wine-cask! At last, however, when he could talk as well as you and I, and walk straight, I took him back to the Hôtel de Chalusse."

"That was right. But didn't you have some business to transact with him?"

"That's been arranged, monsieur; the agreement has been signed. The

count will have the best of funerals—the finest hearse out, with six horses, twenty-four mourning coaches—a grand display, in fact. It will be worth seeing."

M. Fortunat smiled graciously. "That ought to bring you a handsome commission," he said, benignly.

Employed by the job, Chupin was the master of his own time, free to utilise his intelligence and industry as he chose, but M. Fortunat did not like his subordinates to make any money except through him. Hence his approval, in the present instance, was so remarkable that it awakened Chupin's suspicions. "I shall make a few sous, probably," he modestly replied, "a trifle to aid my good mother in keeping the pot boiling."

"So much the better, my boy," said M. Fortunat. "I like to see money gained by those who make a good use of it. And to prove this, I'm about to employ you in an affair which will pay you handsomely if you prosecute it successfully."

Chupin's eyes brightened at first but grew dark a moment afterwards, for delight had been quickly followed by a feeling of distrust. He thought it exceedingly strange that an employer should take the trouble to climb to a sixth floor merely for the purpose of conferring a favour on his clerk. There must be something behind all this; and so it behove him to keep his eyes open. However, he knew how to conceal his real feelings; and it was with a joyous air that he exclaimed: "Eh! What? Money? Now? What must I do to earn it?"

"Oh! a mere trifle," replied the agent; "almost nothing, indeed." And drawing his chair nearer to the bed on which his employé was seated, he added: "But first, one question, Victor. By the way in which a woman looks at a young man in the street, at the theatre or anywhere—would you know if she were watching her son?"

Chupin shrugged his shoulders. "What a question!" he retorted. "Nonsense! monsieur, it would be impossible to deceive me. I should only have to remember my mother's eyes when I return home in the evening. Poor woman! although she's half blind, she sees me—and if you wish to make her happy, you've only to tell her I'm the handsomest and most amiable youth in Paris."

M. Fortunat could not refrain from rubbing his hands, so delighted was he to see his idea so perfectly understood and so admirably expressed. "Good!" he declared, "very good! That's intelligence, if I am any judge. I have not been deceived in you, Victor."

Victor was on fire with curiosity. "What am I to do, monsieur?" he asked eagerly.

"This: you must follow a woman whom I shall point out to you, follow her everywhere without once losing sight of her, and so skilfully as not to let her suspect it. You must watch her every glance, and when her eyes tell you that she is looking at her son, your task will be nearly over. You will then only have to follow this son, and find out his name and address, what he does, and how he lives. I don't know if I explain what I mean very clearly."

This doubt was awakened in M. Fortunat's mind by Chupin's features, which were expressive of lively astonishment and discontent. "Excuse me, monsieur," he said, at last, "I do not understand at all."

"It's very simple, however. The lady in question has a son about twenty. I know it—I'm sure of it. But she denies it; she conceals the fact, and he doesn't even know her. She secretly watches over him, how-

ever—she provides him with money, and every day she finds some way of seeing him. Now, it is to my interest to find this son."

Chupin's mobile face became actually threatening in its expression; he frowned darkly, and his lips quivered. Still this did not prevent M. Fortunat from adding, with the assurance of a man who does not even suspect the possibility of a refusal: "Now, when shall we set about our task?"

"Never!" cried Chupin, violently; and, rising, he continued: "No! I wouldn't let my good mother eat bread earned in that way—it would strangle her! Turn spy! I? Thanks—some one else may have the job!" He had become as red as a turkey cock, and such was his indignation that he forgot his accustomed reserve and the caution with which he had so far concealed his antecedents. "I know this game—I've tried it!" he went on, vehemently. "One might as well take one's ticket to prison by a direct road. I should be there now if it hadn't been for Monsieur André. I was thirsting for gold, and, like the brigand that I was, I should have killed the man; but in revenge he drew me from the mire and placed my feet on solid ground once more. And now, shall I go back to my vile tricks again? Why I'd rather cut my leg off! I'm to hunt down this poor woman—I'm to discover her secret so that you may extort money from her, am I? No, not I! I should like to be rich, and I shall be rich; but I'll make my money honestly. I hope to touch my hundred-franc pieces without being obliged to wash my hands afterwards. So, a very good evening to your establishment."

M. Fortunat was amazed, and at the same time much annoyed, to find himself forsaken on account of such a trifle. He feared too that Chupin might let his tongue wag if he left his employment. So, since he had confided this project to Chupin, he was determined that Chupin alone should carry it into execution. Assuming his most severe and injured manner, he sternly exclaimed: "I think you have lost your senses." His demeanour and intonation were so perfectly cool that Chupin seemed slightly abashed. "It seems that you think me capable of urging you to commit some dangerous and dishonourable act," continued M. Fortunat.

"Why—no—m'sieur—I assure you—"

There was such evident hesitation in the utterance of this "no" that the agent at once resumed: "Come, you are not ignorant of the fact that in addition to my business as a collector, I give my attention to the discovery of the heirs of unclaimed estates? You are aware of this? Very well then: pray tell me how I am to find them without searching for them? If I wish this lady to be watched, it is only in view of reaching a poor lad who is likely to be defrauded of the wealth that rightfully belongs to him. And when I give you a chance to make forty or fifty francs in a couple of days, you receive my proposition in this style! You are an ingrate and a fool, Victor!"

Chupin's nature combined, in a remarkable degree, the vices and peculiarities of the dweller in the Paris faubourgs, who is born old, but who, when aged in years, still remains a *gamin*. In his youth he had seen many strange things, and acquired a knowledge of life that would have put the experience of a philosopher to shame. But he was not fit to cope with M. Fortunat, who had an immense advantage over him, by reason of his position of employer, as well as by his fortune and education. So Chupin was both bewildered and disconcerted by the cool arguments his patron brought forward; and what most effectually allayed his suspicions was the small compensation offered for the work—merely forty or fifty francs.

"Small potatoes, upon my word!" he thought. "Just the price of an honest service; he would have offered more for a piece of rascality." So, after considering a moment, he said, aloud: "Very well; I'm your man, m'sieur."

M. Fortunat was secretly laughing at the success of his ruse. Having come with the intention of offering his agent a handsome sum, he was agreeably surprised to find that Chupin's scruples would enable him to save his money. "If I hadn't found you engaged in study, Victor," he said, "I should have thought you had been drinking. What venomous insect stung you so suddenly? Haven't I confided similar undertakings to you twenty times since you have been in my employment? Who ransacked Paris to find certain debtors who were concealing themselves? Who discovered the Vantrassons for me? Victor Chupin. Very well. Then allow me to say that I see nothing in this case in any way differing from the others, nor can I understand why this should be wrong, if the others were not."

Chupin could only have answered this remark by saying that there had been no mystery about the previous affairs, that they had not been proposed to him late at night at his own home, and that he had acted openly, as a person who represents a creditor has a recognised right to act. But, though he felt that there *was* a difference in the present case, it would have been very difficult for him to explain in what this difference consisted. Hence, in his most resolute tone: "I'm only a fool, m'sieur," he declared; "but I shall know how to make amends for my folly."

"That means you have recovered your senses," said M. Fortunat, ironically. "Really, that's fortunate. But let me give you one bit of advice: watch yourself, and learn to bridle your tongue. You won't always find me in such a good humour as I am this evening."

So saying, he rose, passed out into the adjoining room, bowed civilly to his clerk's mother, and went off. His last words, as he crossed the threshold, were: "So I shall rely upon you. Be at the office to-morrow a little before noon."

"It's agreed, m'sieur."

The blind woman had risen, and had bowed respectfully; but, as soon as she was alone with her son, she asked: "What is this business he bids you undertake in such a high and mighty tone?"

"Oh! an every-day matter, mother."

The old woman shook her head. "Why were you talking so loud then?" she inquired. "Weren't you quarrelling? It must be something very grave when it's necessary to conceal it from me. I couldn't see your employer's face, my son; but I heard his voice, and it didn't please me. It isn't the voice of an honest, straightforward man. Take care, Toto, and don't allow yourself to be cajoled—be prudent."

However, it was quite unnecessary to recommend prudence to Victor Chupin. He had promised his assistance, but not without a mental reservation. "No need to see danger till it comes," he had said to himself. "If the thing proves to be of questionable propriety after all, then good-evening; I desert."

It remains to know what he meant by questionable propriety; the meaning of the expression is rather vague. He had returned in all honesty and sincerity of purpose to an honest life, and nothing in the world would have induced him, avaricious though he was, to commit an act that was positively wrong. Only the line that separates good from evil was not

very clearly defined in his mind. This was due in a great measure to his education, and to the fact that it had been long before he realized that police regulations do not constitute the highest moral law. It was due also to chance, and, since he had no decided calling, to the necessity of depending for a livelihood upon the many strange professions which impecunious and untrained individuals, both of the higher and lower classes, adopt in Paris.

However, on the following morning he arrayed himself in his best apparel, and at exactly half-past eleven o'clock he rang at his employer's door. M. Fortunat had made quick work with his clients that morning, and was ready, dressed to go out. He took up his hat and said only the one word, "Come." The place where the agent conducted his clerk was the wine-shop in the Rue de Berry, where he had made inquiries respecting Madame d'Argelès the evening before; and on arriving there, he generously offered him a breakfast. Before entering, however, he pointed out Madame d'Argelès' pretty house on the opposite side of the street, and said to him: "The woman whom you are to follow, and whose son you are to discover, will emerge from that house."

At that moment, after a night passed in meditating upon his mother's prophetic warnings, Chupin was again beset by the same scruples which had so greatly disturbed him on the previous evening. However, they soon vanished when he heard the wine-vendor, in reply to M. Fortunat's skilful questions, begin to relate all he knew concerning Madame Lia d'Argelès, and the scandalous doings at her house. The seeker after lost heirs and his clerk were served at a little table near the door; and while they partook of the classical beefsteak and potatoes—M. Fortunat eating daintily, and Chupin bolting his food with the appetite of a shipwrecked mariner—they watched the house opposite.

Madame d'Argelès received on Saturdays, and, as Chupin remarked, "there was a regular procession of visitors."

Standing beside M. Fortunat, and flattered by the attention which such a well-dressed gentleman paid to his chatter, the landlord of the house mentioned the names of all the visitors he knew. And he knew a good number of them, for the coachmen came to his shop for refreshments when their masters were spending the night in play at Madame d'Argelès' house. So he was able to name the Viscount de Coralth, who dashed up to the door in a two-horse phaeton, as well as Baron Trigault, who came on foot, for exercise, puffing and blowing like a seal. The wine-vendor, moreover, told his customers that Madame Argelès never went out before half-past two or three o'clock, and then always in a carriage—a piece of information which must have troubled Chupin; for, as soon as the landlord had left them to serve some other customers, he leant forward and said to M. Fortunat: "Did you hear that? How is it possible to track a person who's in a carriage?"

"By following in another vehicle, of course."

"Certainly, m'sieur; that's as clear as daylight. But that isn't the question. The point is this: How can one watch the face of a person who turns her back to you? I must see this woman's face to know whom she looks at, and how."

This objection, grave as it appeared, did not seem to disturb M. Fortunat. "Don't worry about that, Victor," he replied. "Under such circumstances, a mother wouldn't try to see her son from a rapidly-moving carriage. She will undoubtedly alight, and contrive some means of passing and repass-

ng him—of touching him, if possible. Your task will only consist in ollowing her closely enough to be on the ground as soon as she is. Con- ine your efforts to that; and if you fail to-day, you'll succeed to-morrow r the day after—the essential thing is to be patient."

He did better than to preach patience—he practised it. The hours wore way, and yet he did not stir from his post, though nothing could have been more disagreeable to him than to remain on exhibition, as it were, at he door of a wine-shop. At last, at a little before three o'clock, the gates ver the way turned upon their hinges, and a dark-blue victoria, in which woman was seated, rolled forth into the street. "Look!" said M. Fortunat, eagerly. "There she is!"

XVIII.

THE woman in the carriage was none other than Madame Lia d'Argelès. She was attired in one of those startling costumes which are the rage now-a-days, and which impart the same bold and brazen appearance to all who wear them; so much so, that the most experienced observers are no longer able to distinguish the honest mother of a family from a notorious character. A Dutchman, named Van Klopen, who was originally a tailor at Rotterdam, rightfully ascribes the honour of this progress to himself. One can scarcely explain how it happens that this individual, who calls himself "the dress- maker of the queens of Europe," has become the arbiter of Parisian elegance; but it is an undeniable fact that he does reign over fashion. He decrees the colours that shall be worn, decides whether dresses shall be short or long, whether paniers shall be adopted or discarded, whether ruches and puffs and flowers shall be allowed, and in what form; and his subjects, the so-called elegant women of Paris, obey him implicitly.

Madame d'Argelès would personally have preferred less finery, perhaps, but it would not have done for her to be out of the fashion. She wore an imperceptible hat, balanced on an immense pyramidal chignon, from which escaped a torrent of wavy hair. "What a beautiful woman!" exclaimed the dazzled Chupin, and indeed, seen from this distance, she did not look a day more than thirty-five—an age when beauty possesses all the alluring charm of the luscious fruit of autumn. She was giving orders for the drive, and her coachman, with a rose in his button-hole, listened while he reined in the spirited horse. "The weather's superb," added Chupin. "She'll no doubt drive round the lakes in the Bois de Boulogne—"

"Ah, she's off!" interrupted M. Fortunat. "Run, Victor, run! and don't be miserly as regards carriage hire; all your expenses shall be liberally refunded you."

Chupin was already far away. Madame d'Argelès's horse went swiftly enough, but the agent's emissary had the limbs and the endurance of a stag, and he kept pace with the victoria without much difficulty. And as he ran along, his brain was busy. "If I don't take a cab," he said to him- self, "if I follow the woman on foot, I shall have a perfect right to pocket the forty-five sous an hour—fifty, counting the gratuity—that a cab would cost."

But on reaching the Champ Elysées, he discovered, to his regret, that this plan was impracticable, for on running down the Avenue de l'Impéra- trice after the rapidly driven carriage, he could not fail to attract attention.

Stifling a sigh of regret, and seeing a cab at a stand near by, he hastily hailed it. "Where do you want to go, sir?" inquired the driver.

"Just follow that blue victoria, in which a handsome lady is seated, my good fellow."

The order did not surprise the cabman, but rather the person who gave it; for in spite of his fine apparel, Chupin did not seem quite the man for such an adventure. "Excuse me," said the Jehu, in a slightly ironical tone, "I—"

"I said exactly what I mean," retorted Chupin, whose pride was severely wounded. "And no more talk—hurry on, or we shall miss the track."

This last remark was correct, for if Madame d'Argelès's coachman had not slackened his horse's speed on passing round the Arc de Triomphe, the woman would have escaped Chupin, for that day at least. However, this circumstance gave the cabman an opportunity to overtake the victoria; and after that the two vehicles kept close together as they proceeded down the Avenue de l'Impératrice. But at the entrance of the Bois de Boulogne Chupin ordered his driver to stop. "Halt!" he exclaimed, "I shall get out. Pay the extra cab charges for passing beyond the limits of Paris!—never! I'll crawl on my hands and knees first. Here are forty sous for your fare—and good evening to you."

And, as the blue victoria was already some distance in advance, he started off at the top of his speed to overtake it. This manœuvre was the result of his meditations while riding along. "What will this fine lady do when she gets to the Bois?" he asked himself. "Why, her coachman will take his place in the procession, and drive her slowly round and round the lakes. Meantime I can trot along beside her without attracting attention—and it will be good for my health."

His expectations were realized in every respect. The victoria soon turned to the left, and took its place in the long line of equipages which were slowly winding round the lake. Having gained the foot-path which borders the sheet of water, Chupin followed the carriage easily enough, with his hands in his pockets, and his heart jubilant at the thought that he would gain the sum supposed to have been spent in cab hire, in addition to the compensation which had been promised him. "This is a strange way of enjoying one's self," he muttered, as he trotted along. "There can't be much pleasure in going round and round this lake. If ever I'm rich, I'll find some other way of amusing myself."

Poor Chupin did not know that people do not go to the Bois to enjoy themselves, but rather to torment others. This broad drive is in reality only a field for the airing of vanity—a sort of open-air bazaar for the display of dresses and equipages. People come here to see and to be seen; and, moreover, this is neutral ground, where so-called honest women can meet those notorious characters from whom they are elsewhere separated by an impassable abyss. What exquisite pleasure it must be to the dames of society to find themselves beside Jenny Fancy or Ninette Simplon, or any other of those young ladies whom they habitually call "creatures," but whom they are continually talking of, and whose toilettes, make-up, and jargon, they assiduously copy!

However, Chupin indulged in none of these reflections. He was engaged in noting Madame d'Argelès' evident anxiety and restlessness. She looked eagerly on all sides, sometimes half leaning out of her carriage, and immediately turning her head whenever she heard the gallop of a horseman

behind her. She was evidently looking or waiting for some one, but the person did not make his appearance, and so, growing weary of waiting, after driving three times round the lake, she made a sign to her coachman, who at once drew out of line, and turned his horse into a side-path. Chupin hastened after the victoria, keeping it in sight until he was fortunate enough to meet an empty cab, which he at once hired. Madame d'Argelès' coachman, who had received his orders, now drove down the Champs Elysées, again crossed the Place de la Concorde, turned into the boulevards, and stopped short at the corner of the Chaussée d'Antin, where, having tied a thick veil over her face, Madame Lia abruptly alighted and walked away.

This was done so quickly that Chupin barely had time to fling two francs to his driver and rush after her. She had already turned round the corner of the Rue du Helder, and was walking rapidly up the street. It was a little after five o'clock, and dusk was setting in. Madame d'Argelès had taken the side of the street allotted to the uneven numbers. After she had passed the Hôtel de Homburg, she slackened her pace, and eagerly scrutinized one of the houses opposite—No. 48. Her examination lasted but a moment, and seemed to be satisfactory. She then turned, and rapidly retraced her steps as far as the boulevard, when, crossing the street to the side of the even numbers, she walked up it again very slowly, stopping before every shop-window.

Convinced that he had almost reached the goal, Chupin also crossed, and followed closely at her heels. He soon saw her start and resume her rapid gait. A young man was coming towards her so quickly indeed that she had not time to avoid him, and a collision ensued, whereupon the young man gave vent to an oath, and hurling an opprobrious epithet in her face, passed on.

Chupin shuddered. "What if that should be her son?" he thought. And while he pretended to be gazing into a shop-window, he stealthily watched the poor woman. She had paused, and he was so near that he could almost have touched her. He saw her raise her veil and follow her insulter with a look which it was impossible to misunderstand. "Oh! oh! It was her son that called her that—" said Chupin to himself, quite horrified. And without more ado, he hastened after the young man.

He was between two and four-and-twenty years of age, rather above the medium height, with very light hair and an extremely pale complexion. His slight moustache would have been almost imperceptible if it had not been dyed several shades darker than his hair. He was attired with that studied carelessness which many consider to be the height of elegance, but which is just the reverse. And his bearing, his moustache, and his low hat, tipped rakishly over one ear, gave him an arrogant, pretentious, rowdyish appearance. "Zounds! that fellow doesn't suit my fancy," growled Chupin, as he trotted along. For he was almost running in his efforts to keep pace with Madame d'Argelès' insulter. The latter's haste was soon explained. He was carrying a letter which he wished to have delivered, and no doubt he feared he would not be able to find a commissionaire. Having discovered one at last, he called him, gave him the missive, and then pursued his way more leisurely.

He had reached the boulevard, when a florid-faced youth, remarkably short and stout, rushed towards him with both hands amicably extended, at the same time crying, loud enough to attract the attention of the passer's by. "Is it possible that this is my dear Wilkie?"

"Yes—alive and in the flesh," replied the young man.

"Well, and what the devil have you been doing with yourself? Last Sunday, at the races, I looked for you everywhere, and not a vestige of Wilkie was to be found. However, you were wise not to go. I am three hundred louis out of pocket. I staked everything on Domingo, the Marquis de Valorsay's horse. I thought I was sure to win—yes, sure. Well, Domingo came in third. Can you understand that? If every one didn't know that Valorsay was a millionaire, it might be supposed there had been some foul play—yes, upon my word—that he had bet against his own horse, and forbidden his jockey to win the race." But the speaker did not really believe this, so he continued, more gaily: "Fortunately, I shall retrieve my losses to-morrow, at Vincennes. Shall we see you there?"

"Probably."

"Then good-bye, until to-morrow."

"Until to-morrow."

Thereupon they shook hands, and each departed on his way.

Chupin had not lost a word of this conversation. "Valorsay a millionaire!" he said to himself. "That's good! Ah, well! now I know my little game-cock's name, and I also know that he goes to the races. Wilkie—that must be an English name; I like the name of d'Argelés better. But where the devil is he going now?"

M. Wilkie had simply paused to replenish his cigar-case at the tobacco office of the Grand Hôtel; and, after lighting a cigar, he came out again, and walked up the boulevard in the direction of the Faubourg Montmartre. He was no longer in a hurry now; he strolled along in view of killing time, displaying his charms, and staring impudently at every woman who passed. With his shoulders drawn up on a level with his ears, and his chest thrown back, he dragged his feet after him as if his limbs were half paralyzed; he was indeed doing his best to create the impression that he was used up, exhausted, broken down by excesses and dissipation. For that is the fashion —the latest fancy—*chic!*

"Will you never have done?" growled Chupin.

"You shall pay for this, you little wretch!" He was so indignant that the *gamin* element in his nature stirred again under his fine broadcloth, and he had a wild longing to throw stones at M. Wilkie. He would certainly have trodden on his heels, and have picked a quarrel with him, had it not been for a fear of failing in his mission, and thereby losing his promised reward.

He followed his man closely, for the crowd was very great. Night was coming on, and the gas was lit on all sides. The weather was very mild, and there was not an unoccupied table in front of the *cafés*, for it was now the absinthe hour. How does it happen that every evening, between five and seven o'clock, every one in Paris who is known—who is somebody or something—can be found between the Passage de l'Opera and the Passage Jouffroy? Hereabout you may hear all the latest news and gossip of the fashionable world, the last political canards—all the incidents of Parisian life which will be recorded by the papers on the following morning. You may learn the price of stocks, and obtain tips for to-morrow's Bourse; ascertain how much Mademoiselle A's necklace cost, and who gave it to her; with the latest news from Prussia; and the name of the bank chairman or cashier who has absconded during the day, and the amount he has taken with him.

The crowd became more dense as the Faubourg Montmartre was approached, but Wilkie made his way through the throng with the ease of an

old *boulevardier*. He must have had a large circle of acquaintances, for he distributed bows right and left, and was spoken to by five or six promenaders. He did not pass the Terrasse Jouffroy, but, pausing there, he purchased an evening paper, retraced his steps, and about seven o'clock reached the Café Riche, which he entered triumphantly. He did not even touch the rim of his hat on going in—that would have been excessively *bad* form; but he called a waiter, in a very loud voice, and imperiously ordered him to serve dinner on a table near the window, where he could see the boulevard—and be seen.

"And now my little fighting-cock is going to feed," thought Chupin. He, too, was hungry; and he was trying to think of some modest restaurant in the neighbourhood, when two young men passed near him and glanced into the *café*.

"Look, there's Wilkie!" observed one of them.

"That's so, upon my word!" responded the other. "And he has money, too; fortune has smiled upon him."

"How do you know that?"

"Why, by watching the fellow; one can tell the condition of his purse as correctly as he could himself. If his funds are low, he has his meals brought to his room from a cook-shop where he has credit; his moustache droops despondingly; he is humble even to servility with his friends, and he brushes his hair over his forehead. When he is in average circumstances, he dines at Launay's, waxes his moustache, and brushes his hair back from his face. But when he dines at the Café Riche, my boy, when he has dyed his moustache, and tips his hat over his ear, and deports himself in that arrogant fashion, why, he has at least five or six thousand francs in his pocket, and all is well with him."

"Where does he get his money from?"

"Who can tell?"

"Is he rich?"

"He must have plenty of money—I lent him ten louis once, and he paid me back."

"Zounds! He's a very honourable fellow, then." Thereupon the two young men laughed, and passed on.

Chupin had been greatly edified. "Now I know you as well as if I were your concierge," he muttered, addressing the unconscious Wilkie; "and when I've followed you home, and learned your number, I shall have richly earned the fifty francs M. Fortunat promised me." As well as he could judge through the window-pane, M. Wilkie was eating his dinner with an excellent appetite. "Ah!" he exclaimed, not without envy, "these fighting-cocks take good care of their stomachs. He's there for an hour at least, and I shall have time to run and swallow a mouthful myself."

So saying, Chupin hastened to a small restaurant in a neighbouring street, and magnificently disbursed the sum of thirty-nine sous. Such extravagance was unusual on his part, for he had lived very frugally since he had taken a vow to become rich. Formerly, when he lived from hand to mouth—to use his own expression—he indulged in cigars and in absinthe; but now he contented himself with the fare of an anchorite, drank nothing but water, and only smoked when some one gave him a cigar. Nor was this any great privation to him, since he gained a penny by it—and a penny was another grain of sand added to the foundation of his future wealth. However, this evening he indulged in the extravagance of a glass of wine, deciding in his own mind that he had fairly earned it.

When he returned to his post in front of the Café Riche, M. Wilkie was no longer alone at his table. He was finishing his coffee in the company of a man of his own age, who was remarkably good-looking—almost too good-looking, in fact—and a glance at whom caused Chupin to exclaim: "What! what! I've seen that face somewhere before—" But he racked his brain in vain in trying to remember who this new-comer was, in trying to set a name on this face, which was positively annoying in its classical beauty, and which he felt convinced had occupied a place among the phantoms of his past. Irritated beyond endurance by what he termed his stupidity, he was trying to decide whether he should enter the café or not, when he saw M. Wilkie take his bill from the hands of a waiter, glance at it, and throw a louis on the table. His companion had drawn out his pocket-book for the ostensible purpose of paying for the coffee he had taken; but Wilkie, with a cordial gesture, forbade it, and made that magnificent, imperious sign to the waiter, which so clearly implies: "Take nothing! All is paid! Keep the change." Thereupon the servant gravely retired, more than ever convinced of the fact that vanity increases the fabulous total of Parisian gratuities by more than a million francs a year.

"My gallant youths are coming out," thought Chupin. "I must keep my ears open." And approaching the door, he dropped on one knee, and pretended to be engaged in tying his shoe-strings. This is one of the thousand expedients adopted by spies and inquisitive people. And when a man is foolish enough to tell his secrets in the street, he should at least be wise enough to distrust the people near him who pretend to be absorbed in something else; for in nine cases out of ten these persons are listening to him, possibly for pay, or possibly from curiosity.

However, the young men whom Chupin was watching were far from suspecting that they were under surveillance. M. Wilkie came out first, talking very loud, as often happens when a man has just partaken of a good dinner, and is blessed with an excellent digestion. "Come, Coralth, my good fellow, you won't desert me in this way? I have a box for the *Variétés*, and you must go with me. We'll see if Silly imitates Thérèsa as perfectly as they say."

"But I have an appointment."

"Oh, well, let it wait. Come, viscount, is it agreed?"

"Ah, you do with me just as you like."

"Good! But, first of all, let us take a glass of beer to finish our cigars. And do you know whom you will find in my box?"

At this moment they passed, and Chupin rose to his feet. "Coralth," he muttered, "Viscount de Coralth. He's not one of our clients. Let me see, Coralth. This is certainly the first time I have ever heard the name. Can it be that I'm mistaken? Impossible!"

The more he reflected, the more thoroughly he became convinced of the accuracy of his first impression, consoling himself with the thought that a name has but a slight significance after all. His preoccupation had at least the advantage of shortening the time which he spent in promenading to and fro, while the friends sat outside a café smoking and drinking. It was still M. Wilkie who monopolized the conversation, while his companion listened with his elbow resting on the table, occasionally nodding his head in token of approbation. One thing that incensed Chupin was that they loitered there, when one of them had a ticket for a box at the theatre in his pocket.

"Idiots!" he growled; "they'll wait till the play's half-over before they

go in. And then they'll let the doors slam behind them for the express purpose of disturbing everybody. Fools, go!"

As if they had heard the command, they rose suddenly, and an instant after they entered the *Variétés*. They entered, but Chupin remained on the pavement, scratching his head furiously, in accordance with his habit whenever he wished to develop his powers of imagination. He was trying to think how he might procure admission to the theatre without paying for it. For several years he had seen every play put upon the stage in Paris, without spending a sou, and he felt that it would be actually degrading to purchase a ticket at the office now. "Pay to see a farce!" he thought. "Not I, I must know some one here—I'll wait for the entr'acte."

The wisdom of this course became apparent when among those who left the theatre at the close of the first act he recognized an old acquaintance, who was now working on the *claque*,* and who at once procured him a ticket of admission for nothing. "Well, it is a good thing to have friends everywhere," he muttered, as he took the seat assigned him.

It was a very good place they had given him—a seat in the second gallery commanding an excellent view of the house. The first glance around told him that his "customers," as he styled them, were in a box exactly opposite. They were now in the company of two damsels in startling toilettes, with exceedingly dishevelled yellow hair, who moved restlessly about, and giggled and stared, and tried in every possible way to attract attention. And their stratagem succeeded. However, this did not seem to please the Viscount de Coralth, who kept himself as far back in the shade as he possibly could. But young Wilkie was evidently delighted, and seemed manifestly proud of the attention which the public was compelled to bestow upon his box. He offered himself as much as possible to the gaze of the audience; moved about, leaned forward, and made himself fully as conspicuous as his fair companions. Less than ever did Chupin now forgive Wilkie for the insult he had cast in the face of Madame Lia d'Argelès, who was probably his mother.

As for the play, M. Fortunat's emissary did not hear twenty words of it. He was so overcome with fatigue that he soon fell asleep. The noise and bustle of each entr'acte aroused him a little, but he did not thoroughly wake up until the close of the performance. His "customers" were still in their box, and M. Wilkie was gallantly wrapping the ladies in their cloaks and shawls. In the vestibule, he and M. de Coralth were joined by several other young men, and the whole party adjourned to a neighbouring café. "These people are certainly afflicted with an unquenchable thirst," growled Chupin. "I wonder if this is their every-day life?"

He, too, was thirsty after his hastily-eaten dinner; and necessity prevailing over economy, he seated himself at a table outside the café, and called for a glass of beer, in which he moistened his parched lips with a sigh of intense satisfaction. He sipped the beverage slowly, in order to make it last the longer, but this did not prevent his glass from becoming dry long before M. Wilkie and his friends were ready to leave. "It seems to me we are going to stay here all night," he thought, angrily.

His ill-humour was not strange under the circumstances, for it was one o'clock in the morning; and after carrying all the tables and chairs round about, inside, a waiter came to ask Chupin to go away. All the other

* The body of hired applauders who are employed at most Parisian theatres to stimulate the enthusiasm of the audience.—[Trans.]

cafés were closing too, and the fastening of bolts or the clanking of shutter chains could be heard on every side. On the pavement stood groups of waiters in their shirt-sleeves, stretching and yawning, and inhaling the fresh night air with delight. The boulevard was fast becoming deserted—the men were going off in little groups, and female forms could be seen gliding along in the dark shadow cast by the houses. The police were watching everywhere, with a word of menace ever ready on their lips; and soon the only means of egress from the cafés were the narrow, low doorways cut in the shutters through which the last customers—the insatiable, who are always ordering one thimbleful more to finish—passed out.

It was through a portal of this sort that M. Wilkie and his companions at last emerged, and on perceiving them, Chupin gave a grunt of satisfaction. "At last," he thought, "I can follow the man to his door, take his number, and go home."

But his joy was short-lived, for M. Wilkie proposed that the whole party should go and take supper. M. de Coralth demurred to the idea, but the others overruled his objections, and dragged him away with them.

XIX.

"Ah! this is a bad job!" growled Chupin. "Go, go, and never stop!"

What exasperated him even more than his want of sleep was the thought that his good mother must be waiting for him at home in an agony of anxiety; for since his reformation he had become remarkably regular in his habits. What should he do? "Go home," said Reason; "it will be easy enough to find this Wilkie again. There can be little doubt that he lives at No. 48, in the Rue du Helder." "Remain," whispered Avarice; "and, since you have accomplished so much, finish your work. M. Fortunat won't pay for conjectures, but for a certainty."

Love of money carried the day; so, weaving an interminable chaplet of oaths, he followed the party until they entered Brébant's restaurant, one of the best known establishments which remain open at night-time. It was nearly two o'clock in the morning now; the boulevard was silent and deserted, and yet this restaurant was brilliantly lighted from top to bottom, and snatches of song and shouts of laughter, with the clatter of knives and forks and the clink of glasses, could be heard through the half-opened windows.

"Eight dozen Marennes for No. 6," shouted a waiter to the man who opened oysters near the restaurant-door.

On hearing this order, Chupin shook his clenched fist at the stars. "The wretches!" he muttered through his set teeth, "bad luck to them! Those oysters are for their mouths, plainly enough, for there are eight of them in all, counting those yellow-haired women. They will, no doubt, remain at table until six o'clock in the morning. And they call this enjoying themselves. And meanwhile, poor little Chupin must wear out his shoe-leather on the pavement. Ah! they shall pay for this!"

It ought to have been some consolation to him to see that he was not alone in his misery, for in front of the restaurant stood a dozen cabs with sleepy drivers, who were waiting for chance to send them one of those half-intoxicated passengers who refuse to pay more than fifteen sous for their fare, but give their Jehu a gratuity of a louis. All these vehicles belonged to the peculiar category known as "night cabs"—dilapidated conveyances with soiled ragged linings, and drawn by half-starved, jaded horses.

However, Chupin neither thought of these vehicles, nor of the poor horses, nor, indeed, of the drivers themselves. His wrath had been succeeded by philosophical resignation; he accepted with good grace what he could not avoid. As the night air had become very cool, he turned up the collar of his overcoat, and began to pace to and fro on the pavement in front of the restaurant. He had made a hundred turns perhaps, passing the events of the day in review, when suddenly such a strange and startling idea flashed across his mind that he stood motionless, lost in astonishment. Reflecting on the manner in which M. Wilkie and the Viscount de Coralth had behaved during the evening, a singular suspicion assailed him. Whilst M. Wilkie gradually lost his wits, M. de Coralth had become remarkably cold and reserved. He had seemed to oppose all M. Wilkie's propositions; but he had agreed to them at last, so that his objections had produced much the same effect as a stimulant. It seemed then as if M. de Coralth had some strange interest in wishing to gain ascendency over his friend. At least such was Chupin's opinion. "Oh, oh!" he murmured. "What if *he* should be working up the same little scheme? What if he were acquainted with Madame Lia d'Argelès? What if he knew that there's a fortune waiting for a claimant? I shouldn't at all be surprised if I found that he wanted to cook his bread in our oven. But father Fortunat wouldn't be pleased with the news. Ah! no—he wouldn't even smile—"

Whilst carrying on this little conversation with himself, he stood just in front of the restaurant, looking up into the air, when all of a sudden a window was thrown noisily open, and the figures of two men became plainly visible. They were engaged in a friendly struggle; one of them seemed to be trying to seize hold of something which the other had in his hand, and which he refused to part with. One of these men was M. Wilkie as Chupin at once perceived. "Good!" he said to himself, "this is the beginning of the end!"

As he spoke, M. Wilkie's hat fell on the window-sill, slipped off, and dropped on to the pavement below. With a natural impulse Chupin picked it up, and he was turning it over and over in his hands, when M. Wilkie leant out of the window and shouted in a voice that was thick with wine: "Halloo! Eh, there! Who picked up my hat? Honesty shall be rewarded. A glass of champagne and a cigar for the fellow who'll bring it me in room No. 6."

Chupin hesitated. By going up, he might, perhaps, compromise the success of his mission. But on the other hand his curiosity was aroused, and he very much wished to see, with his own eyes, how these young men were amusing themselves. Besides, he would have an opportunity of examining this handsome viscount, whom he was certain he had met before, though he could not tell when or where. In the meantime, M. Wilkie had perceived him.

"Come, you simpleton!" he cried; "make haste. You can't be very thirsty."

The thought of the viscount decided Chupin. Entering the restaurant and climbing the staircase, he had just reached the landing when a pale-looking man, who had a smoothly-shaven face and was dressed in black, barred his way and asked: "What do you want?"

"M'sieur, here's a hat which fell from one of your windows and—"

"All right, hand it here."

But Chupin did not seem to hear this order. He was beginning a long explanation, when a curtain near by was pushed aside, and M. Wilkie

called out: "Philippe! eh, Philippe!—bring me the man who picked up my hat."

"Ah!" said Chupin, "you see, m'sieur, that he asks for me."

"Very well," said Philippe. "Go on, then." And raising the *portière* he pushed Chupin into room No. 6.

It was a small, square apartment, with a very low ceiling. The temperature was like that of a furnace, and the glare of the gaslights almost blinded one. The supper was over, but the table had not yet been cleared, and plates full of leavings showed that the guests had fairly exhausted their appetites. Still, with the exception of M. Wilkie, every one present seemed to be terribly bored. In one corner, with her head resting on a piano, sat one of the yellow-haired damsels, fast asleep, while, beside the window, M. de Coralth was smoking with his elbows propped upon the table. The four other young men were looking on phlegmatically. "Ah! here's my hat," exclaimed M. Wilkie, as soon as Chupin appeared. "Wait and receive your promised reward." And thereupon he rang the bell, crying at the top of his voice: "Henry, you sleepy head—a clean glass and some more of the widow Cliquot's champagne!"

Several bottles were standing upon the table, only half empty, and one of M. Wilkie's friends called his attention to this fact, but he shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "You must take me for a fool," he said, contemptuously. "A man doesn't drink stale wine when he has the prospect of such an inheritance as is coming to me—"

"Wilkie!" interrupted M. de Coralth, quickly; "Wilkie!"

But he was too late; Chupin had heard and understood everything. His conjectures had proved correct. M. Wilkie knew his right to the estate; M. Fortunat had been forestalled by the viscount, and would merely have his labour for his pains. "No chance for the guv'nor!" thought the agent's emissary. "And what a blow after the De Valorsay affair! It's enough to give him the jaundice!"

For a youth of his age, Chupin controlled his feelings admirably; but the revelation came so suddenly that he had started despite himself, and changed colour a trifle. M. de Coralth saw this; and, though he was far from suspecting the truth, his long repressed anger burst forth. He rose abruptly, took up a bottle, and filling the nearest glass, he rudely exclaimed: "Come, drink that—make haste—and clear out!"

Victor Chupin must have become very sensitive since his conversion. In former times he was not wont to be so susceptible as to lose his temper when some one chanced to address him in a rather peremptory manner, or to offer him wine out of the first available glass. But M. de Coralth inspired him with one of those inexplicable aversions which cannot be restrained. "Eh! tell me if it's because we've drank champagne together before that you talk to me like that?" the young fellow retorted, savagely.

It was only a random shot, but it reached home. The viscount seemed touched to the quick. "You hear that, Wilkie," said he. "This will teach you that the time of your compatriot, Lord Seymour, has passed by. The good-humoured race of plebeians who respectfully submitted to the blows with which noblemen honoured them after drinking, has died out. This ought to cure you of your unfortunate habit of placing yourself on terms of equality with all the vagabonds you meet."

Chupin's hair fairly bristled with anger. "What! what!" he exclaimed, "I'll teach you to call me a vagabond, you scoundrel!"

His gesture, his attitude, and his eyes were so expressive of defiance and

menace that two of the guests sprang up and caught him by the arm. "Go, go," they said.

But he freed himself from their grasp. "Go!" he replied. "Never! He called me a vagabond. Am I to pocket the insult quietly and walk off with it? You can scarcely expect that. First, I demand an apology."

This was asking too much of the Viscount de Coralth. "Let the fool alone," he remarked, with affected coolness, "and ring for the waiters to kick him out."

It did not require this new insult to put Chupin in a furious passion. "Come on!" he exclaimed. "Ah, ha! Where's the fellow who'll turn me out? Let him come. I'll teach him a lesson!" And as he spoke he squared his shoulders, inflated his chest, and threw the weight of his entire body on his left leg, after the most approved method of sparring masters.

"Go, go!" insisted Wilkie's friends.

"Yes, I'll go with pleasure, but your friend must go, too. Is he a man? Then let him come, and we'll settle this outside." And seeing that they were again trying to seize him: "Hands off!" he thundered, "or I'll strike. You were not obliged to invite me here. It isn't my business to furnish amusement to parties who've drunk too much wine. And why should you despise me? It's true I haven't any money while you have plenty—that I work and you carouse. Still that's no reason why you should scorn me. Besides, those who are poor in the morning are sometimes rich in the evening. Every dog has his day. I have an idea that I shall have some coin when yours is all gone. Then it will be my turn to laugh; and as I'm a good-natured fellow, I will give you my half-smoked cigars."

M. Wilkie seemed delighted. He had climbed on to the piano and seated himself, with his feet on the key-board; and there, as on a judgment seat, he listened and applauded, alternately taking Chupin's part, and then the viscount's. "Bravo, *gamin!*" or, "Give it to him, Coralth!" he shouted in turn.

This irritated the viscount exceedingly. "I see that we shall be obliged to call in the police to settle the affair," he said, sneeringly.

"The police!" roared Chupin. "Ah! that won't do, you scamp—" But his voice died away in his throat, and he stood motionless, speechless, with his arm raised as if he were about to strike, and his eyes dilated with astonishment.

For a change of expression in M. de Coralth's face had enlightened him; and he suddenly recollected when and under what circumstances he had known this so-called viscount. He remembered, too, the name he had borne when he first met him. "Oh!" he stammered, "oh! oh!"

However, the effect of this discovery was to dispel his anger, or rather to restore his calmness, and, addressing M. de Coralth, he exclaimed: "Don't be angry at what I've said, m'sieur; it was only a jest—I know that there's a wide difference between a poor devil like me and a viscount like you—I haven't a sou, you see, and that maddens me. But I'm not so very bad-looking, fortunately, and I'm always hoping that the daughter of some rich banker will fall in love with me and marry me. Some people have such luck you know. If I meet with any you may be sure I shall pass myself off as the lost child of some great personage—of a duke, for instance—and if the real son exists, and troubles me, why I'll quietly put him out of the way, if possible."

With but one exception the persons present did not understand a single

word of this apparent nonsense; and indeed the yellow-haired damsels stared at the speaker in amazement. Still it was evident that each of these words had a meaning, and a terrible meaning for M. de Coralth. Accustomed for years to control his features, he remained apparently unmoved—he even smiled; but a close observer could have detected anguish in his eyes, and he had become very pale. At last, unable to endure the scene any longer, he drew a hundred-franc bank-note from his pocket-book, crumpled it in his hand and threw it at Chupin, saying: "That's a very pretty story you are telling, my boy; but we've had enough of it. Take your pay and leave us."

Unfortunately, the note struck Chupin full in the face. He uttered a hoarse cry of rage, and, by the way in which he seized and brandished an empty bottle, it might have been imagined that M. de Coralth was about to have his head broken. But no. Thanks to a supreme effort of will, Chupin conquered this mad fury; and, dropping the bottle, he remarked to the young women who were uttering panic-stricken shrieks: "Be quiet; don't you see that I was only in fun."

But even M. Wilkie had found the fun a little rough, and even dangerous. Several of the young fellows present sprang up, with the evident intention of pushing Chupin out of the room, but he checked them with a gesture. "Don't disturb yourselves, gentlemen," he said. "I'm going, only let me find the bank-note which this gentleman threw at me."

"That's quite proper," replied M. Wilkie, approvingly; "look for it."

Chupin did so, and at last found it lying almost under the piano. "Now," he remarked, "I should like a cigar."

A score or so were lying in a dish. He gravely selected one of them and coolly cut off the end of it before placing it in his mouth. Those around watched him with an air of profound astonishment, not understanding this ironical calmness following so closely upon such a storm of passion. Then he, Victor Chupin, who had, it seems to me, but one aim in life—to become rich—Victor Chupin, who loved money above anything else, and had stifled all other passions in his soul—he who often worked two whole days to earn five francs—he who did not disdain to claim his five sous when he went to hire a cab for his employer—he, Chupin, twisted the bank-note in his fingers, lit it at the gas, and used it to light his cigar.

"Ah! he's crazy!" murmured the yellow-haired damsels, with despair in their voices.

But M. Wilkie was enthusiastic. "There's form!" said he. "Fine form and no mistake!"

But Chupin did not even deign to turn his head. He opened the door, and standing on the threshold, he bowed to M. de Coralth with an ironical smile. "Until we meet again, Monsieur Paul," said he. "And kindly remember me to Madame Paul, if you please."

If the others had been less astonished, they would have no doubt have remarked the prodigious effect of this name upon their brilliant friend. He became ghastly pale and fell back in his chair. Then, suddenly, he bounded up as if he wished to attack his enemy. But pursuit seemed likely to yield no result, for Chupin was already on the boulevard.

It was daybreak. Paris was waking up; the bakers were standing at their doors, and boys in their shirt-sleeves, with their eyes swollen with sleep, were taking down the shutters of the wine-shops. A cloud of dust, raised by the street-sweepers, hung in the distance; the rag-pickers wandered about, peering among the rubbish; the noisy milk-carts jolted along at a gallop, and workmen were proceeding to their daily toil, with

hunches of bread in their hands. The morning air was very chilly; nevertheless, Chupin seated himself on a bench across the boulevard, at a spot where he could watch the entrance of the restaurant without being seen. He had just experienced one of those sudden shocks which so disturb the mind, that one becomes insensible to outward circumstances, whatever they may be. He had recognised in the so-called Viscount de Coralth, the man whom he had hated above all others in the world, or, rather, the only man whom he hated, for his was not a bad heart. Impressionable to excess like a true child of the faubourgs, he had the Parisian's strange mobility of feeling. If his anger was kindled by a trifle, the merest nothing usually sufficed to extinguish it. But matters were different respecting this handsome viscount! "God! how I hate him!" he hissed through his set teeth. "God! how I hate him!"

For once, years before, as he had confessed to M. Fortunat, Chupin had been guilty of a cowardly and abominable act, which had nearly cost a man his life. And this crime, if it had been successful, would have benefited the very fellow who concealed his sinful shameful past under the high sounding name of Coralth. How was it that Chupin had not recognized him at once? Because he had worked for this fellow without knowing him, receiving his orders through the miserable wretches who pandered to his vices. He had only seen him personally once or twice, and had never spoken to him. Later—too late—he discovered what vile intrigue it was that he had served. And when he became sincerely repentant he loathed this Coralth who had caused his crime.

Nor was this all. The recognition of Coralth had inspired him with remorse. It had aroused in the recesscs of his conscience a threatening voice which cried: "What are you doing here? You are acting as a spy for a man you distrust, and whose real designs you are ignorant of. It was in this way you began before. Have you forgotten what it led to? Have you not sin enough already upon your conscience? Blood enough upon your hands? It is folly to pretend that one may serve as a tool for villains, and still remain an honest man!"

It was this voice which had given Chupin the courage to light his cigar with the bank-note. And this voice still tortured him, as seated on the bench he now tried to review the situation. Where, indeed, was he? With rare good luck he had discovered the son whom Madame Lia d'Argelès had so long and successfully concealed. But contrary to all expectations this young fellow already knew of the inheritance which he was entitled to. M. de Coralth had already achieved what M. Fortunat had meant to do; and so the plan was a failure, and it was useless to persist in it.

This would have ended the matter if Chupin had not chanced to know the Viscount de Coralth's shameful past. And this knowledge changed everything, for it gave him the power to interfere in a most effectual manner. Armed with this secret, he could bestow the victory on M. Fortunat, and force M. de Coralth to capitulate. And he could do this all the more easily, as he was sure that Coralth had not recognized him, and that he was perhaps ignorant of his very existence. Chupin had allowed himself to be carried away by a sudden impulse of anger which he regretted; he had made an ironical illusion to his enemy's past life, but after all this had done no particular harm. So nothing prevented him from lending M. Fortunat his assistance, and thus killing two birds with one stone. He could have his revenge on Coralth, and at the same time insure his patron a large fee, of which he could claim a considerable share for himself. But

no! The idea of deriving any profit whatever from this affair inspired him with a feeling of disgust—honour triumphed over his naturally crafty and avaricious nature. It seemed to him that any money made in this way would soil his fingers; for he realised there must be some deep villainy under all this plotting and planning; he was sure of it, since Coralth was mixed up in the affair. "I will serve my guv'nor for nothing," he decided. "When a man is avenged, he's well paid."

Chupin decided upon this course because he could think of no better plan. Still, if he had been master of events he would have acted otherwise. He would have quietly presented the government with this inheritance which he found M. Wilkie so unworthy of. "The devil only knows what he'll do with it," he thought. "He'll squander it as my father squandered the fortune that was given him. It is only fools who meet with such luck as that."

However, his meditations did not prevent him from keeping a close watch over the restaurant, for it was of the utmost importance that M. Wilkie should not escape him. It was now broad daylight, and customers were leaving the establishment; for, after passing what is generally conceded to be a joyous night, they felt the need of returning home to rest and sleep. Chupin watched them as they emerged. There were some who came out with drooping heads, mumbling incoherent phrases; while others who were equally intoxicated, but more nervous, evinced considerable animation, and sang snatches of songs, or jested loudly with the street-sweepers as they passed on. The more sober, surprised by the sunlight, and blushing at themselves, slunk hastily and quietly away. There was one man, moreover, whom the waiters were obliged to carry to his cab, for he could no longer stand on his feet.

At last Chupin saw the individual clad in black whom Wilkie had addressed as Philippe, and who had endeavoured to prevent him from entering the restaurant, come out, and walk rapidly away. He was warmly clad in a thick overcoat, but he shivered, and his pale, wan face betrayed the man who is a martyr to the pleasures of others—the man who is condemned to be up all night and sleep only in the daytime—the man who can tell you how much folly and beastliness lurk in the depths of the wine-cup, and who knows exactly how many yawns are expressed by the verb "to amuse one's self." Chupin was beginning to feel uneasy. "Can M. Wilkie and his friends have made their escape?" he wondered.

But at that very moment they made their appearance. They lingered awhile on the pavement to chat, and Chupin had an opportunity of observing the effect of their night's dissipation on their faces. The brilliant sunlight made their eyes blink, and the cold sent purple blotches to their bloated cheeks. As for the young women with yellow hair, they appeared as they really were—hideous. They entered the only cab that remained, the most dilapidated one of all, and the driver of which had no little difficulty in setting his horse in motion; whereupon the gentlemen went off on foot.

Many persons would have been vexed and even humiliated by the necessity of appearing at this hour on the boulevard in disorderly attire, which plainly indicated that they had spent the night in debauchery. But with the exception of the Viscount de Coralth, who was evidently out of humour, the party seemed delighted with themselves, as it was easy to see by the way they met the glances of the passers-by. They considered themselves first-class form—they were producing an effect—they were astonishing people. And what more could they desire?

One thing is certain—they were irritating Chupin terribly. He was

following them on the opposite side of the boulevard, at some little distance in the rear, for he was afraid of being recognized. "The wretches!" he growled. "One couldn't draw a pint of manly blood from the veins of all six of them. Ah, if they knew how I hate them!"

But he had not long to nurse his wrath. On reaching the Rue Drouot, two of the gentlemen left the party, and two more went down the Rue Lepelletier. M. Wilkie and the viscount were left to walk down the boulevard alone. They linked their arms and carried on an animated conversation until they reached the Rue du Helder, where they shook hands and separated. What had they said at parting? What agreement had been made between them? Chupin would willingly have given a hundred sous from his private purse to have known. He would have given as much more to have been able to double himself, in order to pursue the viscount, who had started off in the direction of the Madeleine, without having to give up watching and following his friend. But the days of miracles are over. So Chupin sighed, and, following Wilkie, he soon saw him enter No. 48 of the Rue du Helder. The concierge, who was at the door busily engaged in polishing the bell-handle, bowed respectfully. "So there it is!" grumbled Chupin. "I knew he lived there—I knew it by the way that Madame d'Argelès looked at the windows yesterday evening. Poor woman! Ah! her son's a fine fellow and no mistake!"

His compassion for the unhappy mother seemed to recall him to a sense of duty. "Scoundrel that I am!" he exclaimed, striking his forehead with his clenched fist. "Why, I'm forgetting my own good mother!" And as his task was now ended, he started off on the run, taking the shortest cut to the Faubourg Saint-Denis. "Poor mother!" he said to himself as he tore along, "what a night she must have had! She must have cried her eyes out!"

He spoke the truth. The poor woman had passed a night of agony—counting the hours, and trembling each time the door of the house opened, announcing some tenant's return. And as morning approached, her anxiety increased. "For her son would not have allowed her to remain in such suspense," she said to herself, "unless he had met with some accident or encountered some of his former friends—those detestable scamps who had tried to make him as vile as themselves." Perhaps he had met his father, Polyte Chupin, the man whom she still loved in spite of everything, because he was her husband, but whom she judged, and whom indeed she knew, to be capable of any crime. And of all misfortunes, it was an accident, even a fatal accident, that she dreaded least. In her heroic soul the voice of honour spoke even more loudly than the imperious instinct of maternity; and she would rather have found her son lying dead on the marble slabs of the Morgue than seated in the dock at the Assize Court.

Her poor eyes were weary of weeping when she at last recognized Victor's familiar step approaching down the passage. She hastily opened the door, and as soon as she *felt* that he was near her, for she could not see him, she asked: "Where have you spent the night? Where have you come from? What has happened?"

His only answer was to fling his arms round her neck, following alike the impulse of his heart and the advice of experience, which told him that this would be the best explanation he could give. Still it did not prevent him from trying to justify himself, although he was careful not to confess the truth, for he dreaded his mother's censure, knowing well enough that she would be less indulgent than his own conscience.

"I believe you, my son," said the good woman, gravely; "you wouldn't deceive me, I'm sure." And she added: "What reassured me, when you kissed me, was that you hadn't been drinking."

Chupin did not speak a word; this confidence made him strangely uneasy. "May I be hung," he thought, "if after this I ever do anything that I can't confess to this poor good woman!"

But he hadn't time for sentimental reflections. He had gone too far to draw back, and it was necessary for him to report the result of his researches as soon as possible. Accordingly, he hastily ate a morsel, for he was faint with hunger, and started out again, promising to return to dinner. He was in all the greater haste as it was Sunday. M. Fortunat was in the habit of passing these days in the country, and Chupin feared he might fail to see him if he was not expeditious in his movements. And while running to the Place de la Bourse, he carefully prepared the story he meant to relate, deeply impressed by the wisdom of the popular maxim which says: "It is not always well to tell the whole truth." Ought he to describe the scene at the restaurant, mention Coralth, and say that there was nothing more to be done respecting M. Wilkie? After mature deliberation he decided in the negative. If he revealed everything, M. Fortunat might become discouraged and abandon the affair. It would be better to let him discover the truth himself, and profit by his anger to indicate a means of vengeance.

It happened that M. Fortunat had decided not to go to the country that Sunday. He had slept later than usual, and was still in his dressing-gown when Chupin made his appearance. He uttered a joyful cry on seeing his emissary, feeling assured that he must be the bearer of good news, since he came so early. "You have succeeded, then?" he exclaimed.

"Yes, monsieur."

"You have discovered Madame d'Argelès' son?"

"I have him."

"Ah! I knew that you were a clever fellow. Quick, tell me everything. But no, wait a moment."

He rang the bell, and Madame Dodelin at once made her appearance. "Put another plate on the table," said the agent. "M. Chupin will breakfast with me—and serve us at once. You agree, don't you, Victor? It's ten o'clock; I'm hungry; and we can talk better over a bottle of wine."

This was a great honour; and it gave Chupin a fitting idea of the value of the service he had rendered. He was not too much elated, however; though he felt very sorry that he had eaten before he came. On his side, M. Fortunat by no means regretted having conferred this favour on his clerk, for the story which the latter related, caused him intense delight. "Very good!—well done," he exclaimed every other minute. "I could not have done better myself. You shall be abundantly rewarded, Victor, if this affair is successful." And at this thought his satisfaction overflowed in a complacent monologue: "Why shouldn't it succeed?" he asked himself. "Could anything be more simple and certain? I can make any demand I please—one, two, three hundred thousand francs. Ah, it was a good thing that the Count de Chalusse died! Now, I can forgive Valorsay. Let him keep my forty thousand francs; he's quite welcome to them! Let him marry Mademoiselle Marguerite; I wish them a large and flourishing family! And Madame d'Argelès, too, has my benediction!"

He was so confident his fortune was made that at noon he could restrain himself no longer. He hired a cab and accompanied by Chupin he set out for M. Wilkie's abode, declaring that he would wake that young gentleman

up if needs be, but at all events he must see him without delay. When he reached the Rue du Helder, he told Chupin to wait in the cab, and then entering the house, he asked: "Monsieur Wilkie?"

"On the second floor, the door to the right," replied the concierge.

M. Fortunat ascended the stairs very slowly, for he felt the necessity of regaining all his composure, and it was not until he had brought himself to a proper frame of mind that he rang the bell. A small servant, M. Wilkie's fag, who took his revenge in robbing his employer most outrageously, came to the door, and began by declaring that his master was out of town. But M. Fortunat understood how to force doors open, and his manœuvres succeeded so well that he was finally allowed to enter a small sitting-room, while the servant went off saying: "I will go and inform monsieur."

Instead of wasting time in congratulating himself on this first achievement the agent began to inspect the room in which he found himself, as well as another apartment, the door of which stood open. For he was of the opinion that a dwelling-place indicates the character of its inmate, as surely as a shell indicates the form of the creature that inhabits it. M. Wilkie was comfortably lodged; but his rooms were most pretentiously ornamented. They were indeed decorated in more than doubtful taste. There were very few books lying about, but costly riding whips, spurs, rifles, cartridge-boxes, and all the paraphernalia of a fashionable sporting man, were here in abundance.

The only pictures on the wall were a few portraits of celebrated horses, which foreshadowed the fact that M. Wilkie must have, at least, an eighth share in some well-known racer. After this inspection, M. Fortunat smiled complacently. "This young fellow has expensive tastes," he thought. "It will be very easy to manage him."

However his reflections were interrupted by the return of the servant, who exclaimed: "My master is in the dining-room, and if monsieur will enter—"

The heir-hunter did enter, and found himself face to face with M. Wilkie, who was partaking of a cup of chocolate. He was not only up, but he was dressed to go out—dressed in such a style that he would have been taken for a respectable groom. A couple of hours' sleep had made him himself again; and he had regained the arrogance of manner which was the distinguishing trait of his character, and a sure sign that he was in prosperous circumstances. As his unknown visitor entered he looked up, and brusquely asked: "What do you want?"

"I called on business, monsieur."

"Ah, well! this isn't a favourable moment. I must be at Vincennes for the races. I'm interested in a horse. So, you understand—"

M. Fortunat was secretly amused by M. Wilkie's nonchalance. "The young fellow won't be in so much of a hurry when he learns my business," he thought. And he replied aloud: "I can explain what brings me in a few words, monsieur."

"Proceed, then."

M. Fortunat began by closing the door which had been intentionally left open by the servant; and then, returning to M. Wilkie's side, he began with an air of the greatest mystery: "What would you give a shrewd man if he suddenly placed you in undisputed possession of an immense fortune—of a million—two millions, perhaps?"

He had prepared this little effect most carefully, and he fully expected to see M. Wilkie fall on his knees before him. But not at all; the young

gentleman's face never moved a muscle; and it was in the calmest possible tone, and with his mouth half-full that he replied: "I know the rest. You come, don't you, to sell me the secret of an unclaimed inheritance, which belongs to me? Very well, you have come too late."

If the ceiling had fallen and crushed M. Fortunat there and then he would, mentally at least, have not been in a more pitiable condition. He stood silent, motionless, utterly confounded, with his mouth wide open, and such an expression of consternation in his eyes that M. Wilkie burst into a hearty laugh. Still the agent struggled against fate, and ultimately faltered: "Let me explain—permit me—"

"Oh, it would be useless. I know my rights. I have already arranged with a party to prosecute my claims; the agreement will be signed on the day after to-morrow."

"With whom?"

"Ah, excuse me; that's my affair."

He had finished his chocolate, and he now poured out a glass of ice-water, drank it, wiped his mouth, and rose from the table. "You will excuse me, my dear sir, if I leave you," he remarked. "As I said before, I am going to Vincennes. I have staked a thousand louis on 'Pompier de Nanterre,' my horse, and my friends have ventured ten times as much. Who knows what may happen if I'm not there at the start?" And then, ignoring M. Fortunat as completely as if he had not existed, M. Wilkie exclaimed: "Toby, you fool! where are you? Is my carriage below? Quick, bring me my cane, my gloves, and my glasses. Take down that basket of champagne. Run and put on your new livery. Make haste, you little beast, I shall be too late."

M. Fortunat left the room. The frightful anger that had followed his idiotic stupor sent his blood rushing madly to his brain. A purple mist swam before his eyes; there was a loud ringing in his ears, and with each pulsation of his heart his head seemed to receive a blow from a heavy hammer. His feelings were so terrible that he was really frightened. "Am I about to have an attack of apoplexy?" he wondered. And, as every surrounding object seemed to whirl around him, the very floor itself apparently rising and falling under his feet, he remained on the landing waiting for this horrible vertigo to subside and doing his best to reason with himself. It was fully five minutes before he dared to risk the descent; and even when he reached the street, his features were so frightfully distorted that Chupin trembled.

He sprang out, assisted his employer into the cab, and bade the driver return to the Place de la Bourse. It was really pitiful to see the despair which had succeeded M. Fortunat's joyful confidence. "This is the end of everything," he groaned. "I'm robbed, despoiled, ruined! And such a sure thing as it seemed. These misfortunes happen to no one but me! Some one in advance of me! Some one else will capture the prize! Oh, if I knew the wretch, if I only knew him!"

"One moment," interrupted Chupin; "I think I know the man."

M. Fortunat gave a violent start. "Impossible!" he exclaimed.

"Excuse me, monsieur—it must be a vile rascal named Coralth."

It was a bellow rather than a cry of rage that escaped M. Fortunat's lips. To a man of his experience, only a glimmer of light was required to reveal the whole situation. "Ah! I understand!—I see!" he exclaimed. "Yes, you are right, Victor; it's he—Coralth—Valorsay's tool! Coralth was the traitor who, in obedience to Valorsay's orders ruined the man who loved

Mademoiselle Marguerite. The deed was done, at Madame d'Argelès' house. So Coralth knows her, and knows her secret. It's he who has outwitted me." He reflected for a moment, and then, in a very different tone, he said: "I shall never see a penny of the count's millions, and my forty thousand francs are gone forever; but, as Heaven hears me, I will have some satisfaction for my money. Ah!—so Coralth and Valorsay combine to ruin me! Very well!—since this is the case, I shall espouse the cause of Mademoiselle Marguerite and of the unfortunate man they've ruined. Ah, my cherubs, you don't know Fortunat yet! Now we'll see if the innocent don't get the best of you, and if they don't unmask you. I shall do my best, since you have forced me to do it—and gratis too!"

Chupin was radiant; his vengeance was assured. "And I, monsieur," said he, "will give you some information about this Coralth. First of all, the scoundrel's married and his wife keeps a tobacco-shop somewhere near the Route d'Asnières. I'll find her for you—see if I don't."

The sudden stopping of the vehicle which had reached the Place de la Bourse, cut his words short. M. Fortunat ordered him to pay the driver, while he himself rushed upstairs eager to arrange his plan of campaign—to use his own expression. In his absence a commissionaire had brought a letter for him which Madame Dodelin now produced. He broke the seal, and read to his intense surprise, "Monsieur—I am the ward of the late Count de Chalusse. I must speak to you. Will you grant me an interview on Wednesday next, at a quarter past three o'clock?

"Yours respectfully,
"MARGUERITE."

XX.

WHEN Mademoiselle Marguerite left the dead count s bedside at ten o'clock at night to repair to Pascal Ferailleur's house, she did not yet despair of the future. Father, friend, rank, security, fortune—she had lost all these in a single moment—but she could still see a promise of happiness in the distance.

She suffered undoubtedly, and yet she experienced a sort of bitter pleasure at the thought of uniting her life to the man who was as unfortunate as herself, who was slandered as she herself had been slandered, branded with the most cruel and unjust imputations, and had neither fortune nor friends. Others might scorn them: but what did they care for the world's disdain so long as they had the approval of their consciences? Would not their mutual esteem suffice since they loved each other? It seemed to Marguerite that their very misfortunes would bind them more closely to each other, and cement the bonds of their love more strongly. And if it were absolutely necessary for them to leave France—ah, well! they would leave it. To them Fatherland would always be the spot where they lived together.

As the cab approached the Rue d'Ulm she pictured Pascal's sorrow, and the joy and surprise he would feel when she suddenly appeared before him, and faltered: "They accuse you—here I am! I know that you are innocent, and I love you!"

But the brutal voice of the concierge, informing her of Pascal's secret departure, in the most insulting terms, abruptly dispelled her dreams. If Pascal had failed her, everything had failed her. If she had lost him, she had lost her all. The world seemed empty—struggling would be folly—happiness was only an empty name. She indeed longed for death!

Madame Léon who had a set of formulas adapted to all circumstances, undertook to console her. "Weep, my dear young lady, weep; it will do you good. Ah! this is certainly a horrible catastrophe. You are young, fortunately, and Time is a great consoler, M. Ferailleur isn't the only man on earth. Others will love you. There are others who love you already!"

"Silence!" interrupted Marguerite, more revolted than if she had heard a libertine whispering shameful proposals in her ear. "Silence! I forbid you to add another word." To speak of another—what sacrilege! Poor girl. She was one of those whose life is bound up in one love alone, and if that fails them—it is death!

The thought that she was utterly alone added to the horror of her situation. Whom could she depend upon? Not on Madame Léon. She distrusted her; she had no confidence whatever in her. Should she ask for the advice of either of her suitors? The Marquis de Valorsay inspired her with unconquerable aversion, and she despised the so-called General de Fondège. So her only friend, her only protector was a stranger, the old justice of the peace who had taken her defence, by crushing the slander of the servants, and whom she had opened her heart to. But he would soon forget her, she thought; and the future, such as it was presented to her imagination, seemed a terrible one. However, she was too courageous to remain for long in despair—she struggled against her sorrow; and the thought that she might, perhaps, reach Pascal through M. Fortunat at last occurred to her mind. This hope was her sole chance of salvation. She clung to it as a shipwrecked mariner clings to the plank which is his only hope of life.

When she returned to the mansion her mind was made up, and she had regained her usual composure. For ten minutes or so she had been praying by the count's bedside, when M. Bourigeau, the concierge, appeared and handed her a letter which had just been brought to the house. It was addressed to "Mademoiselle Marguerite de Durtal de Chalusse, at the Hôtel de Chalusse, Rue de Courcelles."

Mademoiselle Marguerite blushed. Who was it that addressed her by this name which she no longer had the right to bear? She studied the handwriting for a moment, but she did not remember ever having seen it before. At last, however, she opened the letter and read: "My dear, dear child." "Dear child!" indeed. What could this mean? Was there any one in the world sufficiently interested in her welfare, or loving her enough, to address her in this style? She quickly turned the sheet to see the signature; and when her eyes fell on it she turned pale. "Ah!" she exclaimed, involuntarily, "ah! ah!"

The letter was signed: "Athénaïs de Fondége." It had been written by the general's wife. She resumed her perusal of it, and this is what she read: "I this instant hear of the cruel loss you have sustained, and also learn that, for want of testamentary provisions, the poor Count de Chalusse leaves you, his idolized daughter, almost without resources. I will not attempt to offer you consolation, God alone can assuage certain sorrows. I should come and weep with you if I were not kept in bed by illness. But to-morrow, whatever happens, I shall be with you before breakfast. It is at such a time as this, my poor dear afflicted child, that one can tell one's true friends; and we are yours as I hope to prove. The General feels that he should be insulting and betraying the memory of a man who was his dearest friend for thirty years, if he did not take the count's place, if he did not become your second father. He has offered you our modest home; you have refused. Why? With the authority conferred upon me by my age

and my position as the mother of a family, I tell you that you ought to accept. What other course can you possibly think of? Where would you go, my poor, dear child? But we will discuss this matter to-morrow. I shall find a way to persuade you to love us, and to allow yourself to be loved. In *my* heart you will fill the place of the beloved and lamented daughter I have lost—my beautiful and gentle Bathilde. Once more I say farewell until to-morrow—trusting that you will accept the sympathy and affection of your best friend,

"ATHENAÏS DE FONDÈGE."

Mademoiselle Marguerite was thunderstruck, for the writer of this epistle was a lady whom she had only met five or six times, who had never visited her, and with whom she had scarcely exchanged twenty words. Moreover, she well remembered certain glances with which Madame de Fondège had, on one occasion, tried to crush her—glances so full of cruel contempt that they had drawn bitter tears of sorrow, shame, and anger, from the poor girl. The count himself had said to her at the time: "Don't be so childish, Marguerite, as to trouble yourself about this foolish and impudent woman."

And now this same woman sent her a letter overflowing with sympathy, and claimed her affection and confidence in the tone of an old and tried friend. Was such a change natural? Not being what is called a credulous person, Mademoiselle Marguerite was unable to believe it. She divined that Madame de Fondège must have had some hidden motive in writing such a letter—but what motive was it? Alas! she divined this also only too well. The General, suspecting that she had stolen the missing money, had imparted his suspicions to his wife; and she, being as avaricious and as unscrupulous as himself, was doing her best to secure the booty for her son. Such a calculation is a common one now-a-days. Steal yourself? Fie, never! You would not dare. Besides, you are honest. But it is quite a different thing to profit by other people's rascality. Besides, there are no risks to be encountered.

On perusing the letter a second time, it seemed to Mademoiselle Marguerite that she could hear the General and his wife discussing the means of obtaining a share of the two millions. She could hear Madame de Fondège saying to her husband: "You are a blockhead! You frightened the girl by your precipitancy and roughness. But fortunately, I'm here. Let me manage the affair; and I'll prove that women are far more clever than men." And, thereupon, she had seized her pen, and commenced this letter. In Mademoiselle Marguerite's opinion, the epistle betrayed the joint efforts of the pair. She could have sworn that the husband had dictated the sentence: "The General feels that he should be insulting and betraying the memory of a man who was his dearest friend for thirty years, if he did not become your second father." On the other hand, the phrase, "I shall find a way to persuade you to love us, and to allow yourself to be loved," was unmistakeably the wife's work. The writer's insincerity was fully revealed by one passage of the letter. "You will fill the place of the beloved daughter I have lost," wrote Madame de Fondège. It is true that she had once had a daughter; but the child had died of croup when only six months old, and more than twenty-five years previously.

It was strange, moreover, that this letter had not been sent until ten o'clock in the evening; but, on reflection, Mademoiselle Marguerite was able to explain this circumstance satisfactorily to herself. Before taking any decided step, M. and Madame de Fondège had wished to consult their

son ; and they had been unable to see him until late in the evening. However, as soon as the brilliant hussar had approved the noble scheme concocted by his parents, a servant had been dispatched with the letter. All these surmises were surely very plausible ; but it was difficult to reconcile them with the opinion advanced by the magistrate—that M. de Fondège must know what had become of the missing millions.

Mademoiselle Marguerite did not think of this, however. She was losing her presence of mind at thought of the odious suspicions which rested on her, suspicions which she had seemed to read in the eyes of all who approached her, from Dr. Jodon to the Marquis de Valorsay. It is true that the magistrate had taken her defence ; he had silenced the servants, but would that suffice ? Would she not remain branded by an abominable accusation ? And even the consciousness of her innocence did not reassure her, for Pascal's case warned her that innocence is not a sufficient safeguard against slander.

Could she hope to escape when he had succumbed ! She could tell by the agony that was torturing her own heart, how much he must have suffered. Where was he now ? Beyond the frontiers of France ? They had told her so, but she did not, could not believe it. Knowing him as she knew him, it seemed to her impossible that he had accepted his fate so quickly and without a struggle. A secret presentiment told her that his absence was only feigned, that he was only biding his time, and that M. Fortunat would not have far to go in search of him. It was in M. de Chalusse's bedroom that she thus reflected, but a few steps from the bed on which reposed all that was mortal of the man whose weakness had made her life one long martyrdom, whose want of foresight had ruined her future, but whom she had not the heart to censure. She was standing in front of the window with her burning forehead resting against the glass. At that very moment Pascal was waiting, seated on the curb-stone opposite the mansion. At that very moment he was watching the shadow on the window curtain wondering if it were not Marguerite's. If the night had been clear she might have discerned the motionless watcher in the street below, and divined that it was Pascal. But how could she suspect his presence ? How could she suspect that he had hastened to the Rue de Courcelles as she had hastened to the Rue d'Ulm ?

It was almost midnight when a slight noise, a sound of stealthy footsteps, made her turn. Madame Léon was leaving the room, and a moment later Marguerite heard the house-door leading into the garden open and shut again. There was nothing extraordinary about such an occurrence, and yet a strange misgiving assailed her. Why, she could not explain ; but many trivial circumstances, suddenly invested with a new and alarming significance, recurred to her mind. She remembered that Madame Léon had been restless and nervous all the evening. The housekeeper, who was usually so inactive, who lounged in her arm-chair for hours together, had been moving uneasily about, going up and down-stairs at least a dozen times, and continually glancing at her watch or the clock. Twice, moreover, had the concierge come to tell her that some one wished to see her. "Where can she be going now, at midnight ?" thought Mademoiselle Marguerite, "she who is usually so timid ?"

At first, the girl resisted her desire to solve the question ; her suspicions seemed absurd to her, and, besides, it was distasteful to her to play the spy. Still, she listened, waiting to hear Madame Léon re-enter the house. But more than a quarter of an hour elapsed, and yet the door did not open

or close again. Either Madame Léon had not left the house at all, or else she was still outside. "This is very strange!" thought Mademoiselle Marguerite. "Was I mistaken? I must convince myself." And, obeying a mysterious influence, stronger than her own will, she left the room and went down the stairs. She had reached the hall, when the garden door suddenly opened, and Madame Léon came in. The lights in the hall were burning brightly, so that it was easy to observe the housekeeper's manner and countenance. She was panting for breath, like a person who had been running. She was very pale, and her dress was disordered. Her cap-strings were untied, and her cap had slipped from her head and was hanging over her shoulders. "What is the matter with you?" asked Mademoiselle Marguerite in astonishment. "Where have you been?"

On seeing the girl Madame Léon recoiled. Should she fly off or remain? She hesitated for an instant; and it was easy to read her hesitation in her eyes. She decided to remain; but it was with a constrained smile and in an unnatural voice that she replied: "Why do you speak to me like that, my dear young lady? One might suppose you were angry with me. You must know very well that I've been in the garden!"

"At this hour of the night?"

"*Mon Dieu!* yes—and not for pleasure, I assure you—not by any means —I—I—" She was evidently seeking for some excuse; and, for a moment or two, she stammered forth one incoherent sentence after another, trying to gain time and imploring Heaven to grant her an inspiration.

"Well?" insisted Mademoiselle Marguerite, impatiently. "Why did you go out?"

"Ah! I—I—thought I heard Mirza barking in the garden. I thought she had been forgotten in all the confusion, and that the poor creature had been shut out, so I summoned all my courage, and—"

Mizra was an old spaniel that M. de Chalusse had been very fond of, and the animal's caprices were respected by all the inmates of the house.

"That's very strange," remarked Mademoiselle Marguerite, "for when you rose to leave the room, half an hour ago, Mirza was sleeping at your feet."

"What—really—is it possible?"

"It's certain."

But the worthy woman had already recovered her self-possession and her accustomed loquacity at the same time. "Ah! my dear young lady," she said, bravely, "I'm in such sorrow that I'm losing my senses completely. Still, it was only from the kindest of motives that I ventured into the garden, and I had scarcely entered it before I saw something white run away from me—I felt sure it was Mirza—and so I ran after it. But I could find nothing. I called Mirza! Mirza! and still nothing. I searched under all the trees, and yet I could not find her. It was as dark as pitch, and suddenly a terrible fear seized hold of me—such a terrible fright that I really believe I called for help, and I ran back to the house half crazed."

Any one hearing her would have sworn that she was telling the truth. But, unfortunately, her earlier manner had proved her guilt.

Mademoiselle Marguerite was not deceived when she said to herself: "I am on the track of some abominable act." However, she had sufficient self-control to conceal her suspicions; and she pretended to be perfectly satisfied with the explanation which the housekeeper had concocted. "Ah, my dear Léon, you are altogether too timid; it's absurd," she said, kindly.

The housekeeper hung her head. "I know that I make myself ridiculous," she said, humbly. "But how can I help it? When a person's frightened, she can't reason. And that white object which I saw, as plainly as I see you, what could it have been?" And, convinced that her fable was believed, she grew bolder, and ventured to add: "Oh, my dear young lady, I shall tremble all night if the garden isn't searched. Pray send the servants out to look. There are so many thieves and rascals in Paris!"

Under any other circumstances Mademoiselle Marguerite would have refused to listen to this ridiculous request; but, determined to repay the hypocrite in her own coin, she replied: "Very well; it shall be done." And calling M. Casimir and Bourigeau, the concierge, she ordered them to take a lantern and explore the garden carefully.

They obeyed, though with rather bad grace, not being particularly courageous, either of them, and, of course, they found nothing.

"No matter," said Madame Léon, "I feel safe now." And she did indeed feel more tranquil in mind. "I had a lucky escape!" she said to herself. "What would have become of me, if Mademoiselle Marguerite had discovered the truth?"

But the housekeeper congratulated herself on her victory too soon. Mademoiselle Marguerite not only suspected her of treason, but she was endeavouring to procure proofs of it. She felt certain that the plausible housekeeper had deceived her, and cruelly wronged her as well. But what she could not understand was, how Madame Léon had been able to do so. She had spent a long time in fruitless conjectures, when suddenly she remembered the little garden-gate. "The deceitful creature must have used that gate," she thought.

It was easy for her to verify her suspicion. The little gate had not been exactly condemned, but many months had elapsed since it had been used; so it would be a very simple matter to ascertain whether it had been recently opened or not. "And I will know for certain before an hour has passed," said Mademoiselle Marguerite to herself.

Having come to this conclusion, she feigned sleep, keeping a sharp watch over Madame Léon from between her half-closed eyelids. The housekeeper, after twisting uneasily in her arm-chair, at last became quiet again; and it was soon evident that she was sleeping soundly. Thereupon Mademoiselle Marguerite rose to her feet and stole noiselessly from the room downstairs into the garden. She had provided herself with a candle and some matches, and as soon as she struck a light, she saw that her surmises were correct. The little gate had just been opened and closed again. The cobwebs round about the bolts were torn and broken; the rust which had filled the key-hole had been removed, and on the dust covering the lock the impress of a hand could be detected. "And I have confided my most precious secrets to this wicked woman!" thought Mademoiselle Marguerite. "Fool that I was!"

Already thoroughly convinced, she extinguished her candle. Still, having discovered so much, she wished to pursue her investigation to the end, and so she opened the little gate. The ground outside had been soaked by the recent rains, and had not yet dried, and by the light of the neighbouring street lamp, she plainly distinguished a number of well-defined foot-prints on the muddy soil. An experienced observer would have realised by the disposition of these foot-prints that something like a struggle had taken place here; but Mademoiselle Marguerite was not sufficiently expert for that. She only understood what a child would have

understood—that two people had been standing here for some time. Poor girl! She had not seen Pascal when he was sitting in front of the mansion some hours before! And now no presentiment warned her that these foot-prints were his. In her opinion, the man who had been talking with Madame Léon was either M. de Fondège, or the Marquis de Valorsay—that is to say, Madame Léon was hired to watch her and to render an account of all she said and did.

Her first impulse was to denounce and dismiss this miserable hypocrite; but as she was returning to the house, an idea which an old diplomatist need not have been ashamed of entered her mind. She said to herself that as Madame Léon was unmasked she was no longer to be feared; so why should she be sent away? A known spy can undoubtedly be made a most valuable auxiliary. "Why shouldn't I make use of this wicked woman?" thought Mademoiselle Marguerite. "I can conceal from her what I don't wish her to know, and with a little skill I can make her carry to her employers such information as will serve my plans. By watching her, I shall soon discover my enemy; and who knows if, by this means, I may not succeed in finding an explanation of the fatality that pursues me?"

When Mademoiselle Marguerite returned to her place beside the count's bedside, she had calmly and irrevocably made up her mind. She would not only retain Madame Léon in her service, but she would display even greater confidence in her than before. Such a course was most repugnant to Marguerite's loyal, truthful nature; but reason whispered to her that in fighting with villains, it is often necessary to use their weapons; and she had her honour, her life, and her future to defend. A strange and but imperfectly-defined suspicion had entered her mind. To-night, for the first time, she thought she could discover a mysterious connection between Pascal's misfortunes and her own. Was it mere chance which had struck them at the same time, and in much the same manner? Who would have profited by the abominable crime which had dishonoured her lover, had it not been for M. de Chalusse's death and her own firmness? Evidently the Marquis de Valorsay, for whom Pascal's flight had left the field clear.

All these thoughts were well calculated to drive away sleep; but the poor girl was only twenty, and it was the second night she had watched by the count's bedside. Thus at last fatigue overcame her, and she fell asleep.

In the morning, about seven o'clock, Madame Léon was obliged to shake her to rouse her from the kind of lethargy into which she had fallen. "Mademoiselle," said the housekeeper, in her honeyed voice; "dear mademoiselle, wake up at once!"

"What is the matter? What is it?"

"Ah! how can I explain? My dear young lady, the undertaker's men have come to make arrangements for the ceremony."

Those in charge of the last rites had indeed arrived, and their heavy tread could be heard in the hall and in the courtyard. M. Casimir, who was bursting with self-sufficiency, hurried here, there, and everywhere, indicating, with an imperious gesture, where he wished the black hangings, embroidered with silver and emblazoned with the De Chalusse arms, to be suspended. As the magistrate had given him *carte-blanche*, he deemed it proper, as he remarked to Concierge Bourigeau, to have everything done in grand style. But he took good care not to reveal the fact that he had exacted a very handsome commission from all the people he employed. The hundred francs derived from Chupin had only whetted his appetite for more. At all events, he had certainly spared no pains in view of having

everything as magnificent as possible; and it was not until he considered the display thoroughly satisfactory that he went to warn Mademoiselle Marguerite. "I come to beg mademoiselle to retire to her own room," he said.

"Retire—why?"

He did not reply by words, but pointed to the bed on which the body was lying, and the poor girl realised that the moment of eternal separation had come. She rose, and dragged herself to the bedside. Death had now effaced all traces of the count's last agony. His face wore its accustomed expression again, and it might have been fancied that he was asleep. For a long time Mademoiselle Marguerite stood looking at him, as if to engrave the features she would never behold again upon her memory. "Mademoiselle," insisted M. Casimir; "mademoiselle, do not remain here."

She heard him, and summoning all her strength, she leaned over the bed, kissed M. de Chalusse, and went away. But she was too late, for in passing through the hall she encountered the undertakers, who carried on their shoulders a long metallic case enclosed in two oaken ones. And she had scarcely reached her own room before a smell of resin told her that the men were closing the coffin which contained all that was mortal of M. de Chalusse, her father.

So, none of those terrible details, which so increase one's grief, were spared her. But she had already suffered so much that she had reached a state of gloomy apathy, almost insensibility; and the exercise of her faculties was virtually suspended. Whiter than marble, she fell, rather than seated herself, on a chair, scarcely perceiving Madame Léon, who had followed her.

The worthy housekeeper was greatly excited, and not without cause. As there were no relations, it had been decided that M. de Fondège, the count's oldest friend, should do the honours of the mansion to the persons invited to attend the funeral; and he had sworn that he would be under arms at daybreak, and that they might positively depend upon him. But the hour fixed for the ceremony was approaching, several persons had already arrived, and yet M. de Fondège had not put in an appearance. "It is incomprehensible," exclaimed Madame Léon. "The general is usually punctuality personified. He must have met with some accident." And in her anxiety she stationed herself at the window, whence she could command a view of the courtyard, carefully scrutinizing every fresh arrival.

At last, about half-past nine o'clock, she suddenly exclaimed: "Here he is! Do you hear, mademoiselle, here's the General!"

A moment later, indeed, there was a gentle rap at the door; and M. de Fondège entered. "Ah, I'm late!" he exclaimed; "but, dash it all! it's not my fault!" And, struck by Mademoiselle Marguerite's immobility, he advanced and took her hand. "And you, my dear little one, what is the matter with you?" he asked. "Have you been ill? You are frightfully pale."

She succeeded in shaking off the torpor which was stealing over her, and replied in a faint voice: "I am not ill, monsieur."

"So much the better, my dear child, so much the better. It is our little heart that is suffering, is it not? Yes—yes—I understand. But your old friends will console you. You received my wife's letter, did you not? Ah, well! what she told you, she will do—she will do it. And to prove it, in spite of her illness, she followed me—in fact, she is here!"

XXI.

Mademoiselle Marguerite sprang to her feet, quivering with indignation. Her eyes sparkled and her lips trembled as she threw back her head with a superb gesture of scorn, which loosened her beautiful dark hair, and caused it to fall in rippling masses over her shoulders. "Ah! Madame de Fondège is here!" she repeated, in a tone of crushing contempt—"Madame de Fondège your wife, here!"

It seemed to her an impossibility to receive the hypocrite who had written the letter of the previous evening—the accomplice of the scoundrels who took advantage of her wretchedness and isolation. Her heart revolted at the thought of meeting this woman, who had neither conscience nor shame, who could stoop so low as to intrigue for the millions which she fancied had been stolen. Mademoiselle Marguerite was about to forbid her to enter, or to retire herself, when the thought of her determination to act stealthily restrained her. She instantly realised her imprudence, and, mastering herself with a great effort, she murmured: "Madame de Fondège is too kind! How can I ever express my gratitude?"

Madame de Fondège must have heard this, for at the same moment she entered the room. She was short, and very stout—a faded blond, with her complexion spoilt by a multitude of freckles. She had very large hands, broad, thick feet, and a shrill voice; and the vulgarity of her appearance was all the more noticeable on account of her pretensions to elegance. For although her father had been a wood-merchant, she boasted of her exalted birth, and endeavoured to impress people with the magnificence of her style of living, though her fortune was problematical, and her household conducted in the most frugal style. Her attire suggested a continual conflict between elegance and economy—between real poverty and feigned prodigality. She wore a corsage and over-skirt of black satin; but the upper part of the under-skirt, which was not visible, was made of lute-string costing thirty sous a yard, and her laces were Chantilly only in appearance. Still, her love of finery had never carried her so far as shop-lifting, or induced her to part with her honour for gewgaws—irregularities which are so common now-a-days, even among wives and mothers of families, that people are no longer astonished to hear of them.

No—Madame de Fondège was a faithful wife, in the strict and legal sense of the word. But how she revenged herself! She was "virtuous;" but so dangerously virtuous that one might have supposed she was so against her will, and that she bitterly regretted it. She ruled her husband with a rod of iron. And he who was so terrible in appearance, he who twirled his ferocious moustaches in such a threatening manner, he who swore horribly enough to make an old hussar blush, became more submissive than a child, and more timid than a lamb when he was beside his wife. He trembled when she turned her pale blue eyes upon him in a certain fashion. And woe to him if he ventured to rebel. She suppressed his pocket-money, and during these penitential seasons he was reduced to the necessity of asking his friends to lend him twenty-franc pieces, which he generally forgot to return.

Madame de Fondège was, as a rule, most imperious, envious, and spiteful in disposition; but on coming to the Hôtel de Chalusse she had provided herself with any amount of sweetness and sensibility, and when she

entered the room, she held her handkerchief to her lips as if to stifle her sobs. The General led her towards Mademoiselle Marguerite, and, in a semi-solemn, semi-sentimental tone, he exclaimed: "Dear Athénaïs, this is the daughter of my best and oldest friend. I know your heart—I know that she will find in you a second mother."

Mademoiselle Marguerite stood speechless and rigid. Persuaded that Madame de Fondège was about to throw her arms round her neck and kiss her, she was imposing the most terrible constraint upon herself, in order to conceal her horror and aversion. But she was unnecessarily alarmed. The hypocrisy of the General's wife was superior to that of Madame Léon. Madame de Fondège contented herself with pressing Mademoiselle Marguerite's hands and faltering: "What a misfortune! So young—so sudden! It is frightful!" And, as she received no reply, she added, with an air of sorrowful dignity: "I dare not ask your full confidence, my dear unfortunate child. Confidence can be born only of long acquaintance and mutual esteem. But you will learn to know me. You will give me that sweet name of mother when I shall have deserved it."

Standing at a little distance off, the General listened with the air of a man who has a profound respect for his wife's ability. "Now the ice is broken," he thought, "it will be strange if Athénaïs doesn't do whatever she pleases with that little savage."

His hopes were so brightly reflected upon his countenance, that Madame Léon, who was furtively watching him, became alarmed. "Ah! what do these people want?" she said to herself, "and what do all these endearments mean? Upon my word, I must warn my patron at once." And, fancying that no one noticed her, she slipped quietly and noiselessly from the room.

But Mademoiselle Marguerite was on the watch. Determined to fathom the plotting that was going on around her, and frustrate it, she realised that everything depended upon her watchfulness and her ability to profit even by the most futile incidents. She had noticed the General's triumphant smile, and the look of anxiety that had suddenly clouded Madame Léon's face, so, without troubling herself about "the proprieties," she asked M. and Madame de Fondège to excuse her for a second, and darted after the housekeeper. Ah! she did not need to go far. Leaning over the banisters, she saw Madame Léon and the Marquis de Valorsay in earnest conversation in the hall below; the marquis as phlegmatic and as haughty as usual, but the housekeeper fairly excited. Marguerite at once understood that as Madame Léon knew that the marquis was among the funeral guests, she had gone to warn him of Madame de Fondège s presence. This trivial circumstance proved that M. de Fondège's interests were opposed to those of M. de Valorsay; that they must, therefore, hate each other, and that, with a little patience and skill, she might utilize them, one against the other. It also proved that Madame Léon was the Marquis de Valorsay's paid spy, and that he must therefore have long been aware of Pascal's existence. But she lacked the time to follow out this train of thought. Her absence might awaken the Fondèges' suspicions; and her success depended on letting them suppose that she was their dupe. She therefore returned to them as soon as possible, excusing herself for her abrupt departure as well as she could; but she was not accustomed to deceive, and her embarrassment might have betrayed her had it not been for the General, who fortunately interrupted her by saying: "I, too, must excuse myself, my dear child; but Madame de Fondège will remain with you. I must fulfil a

sacred duty. They are waiting for me downstairs, and they are no doubt becoming impatient. It is the first time in my life that I was ever behind time."

The General was right in losing no more time. At least a hundred and fifty guests had assembled in the reception-rooms on the ground-floor, and they were beginning to think it very strange that they should be kept waiting in this style. And yet curiosity somewhat tempered their impatience. Some of the strange circumstances attending the count's death had been noised abroad; and some well-informed persons declared that a fabulous sum of money had been stolen by a young girl. It is true, they did not think this embezzlement a positive crime. It certainly proved that the young lady in question possessed a strong and determined character; and many of the proudest among the guests would gladly have taken the place of De Valorsay, who, it was rumoured, was about to marry the pretty thief and her millions.

The person who was most disturbed by the delay was the master of the ceremonies. Arrayed in his best uniform, his thin legs encased in black silk stockings, his mantle thrown gracefully over his shoulders, and his cocked hat under his arm, he was looking anxiously about for some one in the assembled crowd to whom he could give the signal for departure. He was already talking of starting off when M. de Fondège appeared. The friends of M. de Chalusse who were to hold the cords of the pall came forward. There was a moment's confusion, then the hearse started, and the whole cortège filed out of the courtyard.

Deep silence followed, so deep that the noise made in closing the heavy gates came upon one with startling effect. "Ah!" moaned Madame de Fondège, "it is over."

Marguerite's only reply was a despairing gesture. It would have been impossible for her to articulate a syllable—her tears were choking her. What would she not have given to be alone at this moment—to have been able to abandon herself without constraint to her emotions! Alas! prudence condemned her to play a part even now. The thought of her future and her honour lent her strength to submit to the deceitful consolations of a woman whom she knew to be a dangerous enemy. And the General's wife was by no means sparing of her consolatory phrases; in fact it was only after a long homily on the uncertainty of life below that she ventured to approach the subject of her letter of the previous evening. "For it is necessary to face the inevitable," she pursued. "The troublesome realities of life have no respect for our grief. So it is with you, my dear child; you would find a bitter pleasure in giving vent to your sorrow, but you are compelled to think of your future. As M. de Chalusse has no heirs, this house will be closed—you can remain here no longer."

"I know it, madame."

"Where will you go?"

"Alas! I don't know."

Madame de Fondège raised her handkerchief to her eyes as if to wipe a furtive tear away, and then, almost roughly, she exclaimed: "I must tell you the truth, my child. Listen to me. I see only two courses for you to adopt. Either to ask the protection of some respectable family, or to enter a convent. This is your only hope of safety."

Mademoiselle Marguerite bowed her head, without replying. To learn the plans which the general's wife had formed she must let her disclose them. However, the girl's silence seemed to make Madame de Fondège

uncomfortable, and at last she resumed: "Is it possible that you think of braving the perils of life alone? I cannot believe it! It would be madness. Young, beautiful, and attractive as you are, it is impossible for you to live unprotected. Even if you had sufficient strength of character to lead a pure and honest life, the world would none the less refuse you its esteem. Mere prejudice, you say? You are quite right; but it is nevertheless true that a young girl who braves public opinion is lost."

It was easy to see by Madame de Fondège's earnestness that she feared Mademoiselle Marguerite would avail herself of this opportunity of recovering her liberty. "What shall I do, then?" asked the girl.

"There is the convent."

"But I love life."

"Then ask the protection of some respectable family."

"The idea of being in any one's charge is disagreeable to me."

Strange to say, Madame de Fondège did not protest, did not speak of her own house. She was too proud for that. Having once offered hospitality, she thought it would arouse suspicion if she insisted. So she contented herself with enumerating the arguments for and against the two propositions, remarking from time to time: "Come, you must decide! Don't wait until the last moment!"

Mademoiselle Marguerite had already decided; but before announcing her decision, she wished to confer with the only friend she had in the world —the old justice of the peace. On the previous evening he had said to her: "Farewell until to-morrow," and knowing that his work in the house had not been concluded, she was extremely surprised that he had not yet put in an appearance.

While conversing with Madame de Fondège she had dexterously avoided compromising herself in any way, when suddenly a servant appeared and announced the magistrate's arrival. He entered the room, with his usual benevolent smile upon his lips, but his searching eyes were never once taken off Madame de Fondège's face. He bowed, made a few polite remarks, and then addressing Marguerite, he said: "I must speak with you, mademoiselle, at once. You may tell madame, however, that you will certainly return in less than a quarter of an hour."

Marguerite followed him, and when they were alone in the count's study and the doors had been carefully closed, the magistrate exclaimed: "I have been thinking a great deal of you, my child, a great deal; and it seems to me that I can explain certain things which worried you yesterday. But first of all, what has happened since I left you?"

Briefly, but with remarkable precision, Marguerite recounted the various incidents which had occurred—her useless journey to the Rue d'Ulm, Madame Léon's strange midnight ramble and conversation with the Marquis de Valorsay, Madame de Fondège's letter, and lastly, her visit and all that she had said.

The magistrate listened with his eyes fixed on his ring. "This is very serious, very serious," he said at last. "Perhaps you are right. Perhaps M. Ferailleur is innocent. And yet, why should he abscond? why should he leave the country?"

"Ah! monsieur, Pascal's flight is only feigned. He is in Paris—concealed somewhere—I'm sure of it; and I know a man who will find him for me. Only one thing puzzles me—his silence. To disappear without a word, without giving me any sign of life—"

The magistrate interrupted her by a gesture. "I see nothing surprising

n that since your companion is the Marquis de Valorsay's spy. How do you know that she has not intercepted or destroyed some letter from M. Pascal?"

Mademoiselle Marguerite turned pale. "Great Heavens! how blind I have been!" she exclaimed. "I did not think of that. Oh, the wretch! if one could only question her and make her confess her crime. It is horrible to think that if I wish to arrive at the truth, I must remain with her and treat her in the future just as I have treated her till now."

But the magistrate was not the man to wander from the subject he was investigating. "Let us return to Madame de Fondège," said he. "She is extremely unwilling to see you go out into the world alone. Why?—through affection? No. Why, then? This is what we must ascertain. Secondly, she seems indifferent as to whether you accept her hospitality or enter a convent."

"She seems to prefer that I should enter a convent."

"Very well. What conclusion can we draw from that? Simply, that the Fondège family don't particularly care about keeping you with them, or marrying you to their son. If they don't desire this, it is because they are perfectly sure that the missing money was not taken by you. Now, let me ask, how can they be so certain? Simply because they know where the missing millions are—and if they know—"

"Ah! monsieur, it is because they've stolen them!"

The magistrate was silent. He had turned the bezel of his ring inside, a sure sign of stormy weather, so his clerk would have said—and though he had his features under excellent control he could not entirely conceal some signs of a severe mental conflict he was undergoing. "Well, yes, my child," he said, at last. "Yes, it is my conviction that the Fondèges possess the millions you saw in the count's escritoire, and which we have been unable to find. How they obtained possession of the money I can't conceive—but they have it, or else logic is no longer logic." He paused again for a moment, and then he resumed, more slowly: "In acquainting you with my opinion on this subject, I have given you, a young girl, almost a child, a proof of esteem and confidence which, it seems to me, few men are worthy of; for I may be deceived, and a magistrate ought not to accuse a person unless he is absolutely certain of his guilt. So you must forget what I have just told you, Mademoiselle Marguerite."

She looked at him with an air of utter astonishment. "You advise me to forget," she murmured, "you wish me to forget."

"Yes; you must conceal these suspicions in the deepest recesses of your heart, until the time comes when you have sufficient proof to convict the culprits. It is true that it will be a difficult task to collect such proofs; but it is not impossible, with the aid of time, which divulges so many crimes. And you may count upon me: I will give you the benefit of all my influence and experience. It shall never be said that I allowed a defenceless girl to be crushed while I saw any chance of saving her."

Tears came to Mademoiselle Marguerite's eyes. So the world was not composed entirely of scoundrels! "Ah! how kind you are, monsieur," she said, "how kind you are!"

"To be sure!" he interrupted, in a benevolent tone. "But, my child, you must help yourself. Remember this: if the Fondèges suspect *our* suspicions, all is lost. Repeat this to yourself at every moment in the day—and be discreet, impenetrable; for people with unclean consciences and hands are always distrustful of others."

There was no necessity to say anything more on this point; and so, with a sudden change of tone, he asked: "Have you any plan?"

She felt that she could, and ought, to confide everything to this worthy old man, and so rising to her feet, with a look of energy and determination on her face, she replied in a firm voice, "My decision is taken, monsieur, subject, of course, to your approval. In the first place I shall keep Madame Léon with me, in whatever capacity she likes, it doesn't matter what. Through her I shall no doubt be able to watch the Marquis de Valorsay, and perhaps eventually discover his hopes and his aim. In the second place, I shall accept the hospitality offered me by the General and his wife. With them, I shall be in the very centre of the intrigue, and in a position to collect proofs of their infamy."

The magistrate gave vent to an exclamation of delight. "You are a brave girl, Mademoiselle Marguerite," he said, "and at the same time a prudent one. Yes; that is the proper course to pursue."

Nothing now remained save to make arrangements for her departure. She possessed some very handsome diamonds and other costly jewels; should she keep them? "They are undoubtedly mine," said she; "but after the infamous accusations levelled at me, I can't consent to take them away with me. They are worth a very handsome amount. I shall leave them with you, monsieur. If the courts restore them to me later—well—I shall take them—and not without pleasure, I frankly confess." Then as the magistrate questioned her anxiously as to her resources, she replied: "Oh! I'm not without money. M. de Chalusse was generosity itself, and my tastes are very simple. From the money he gave me for my clothes I saved more than eight thousand francs in less than six months. That is more than sufficient to maintain me for a year."

The magistrate then explained that when the court took possession of this immense estate, it would surely allow her a certain sum. For whether the count was her father or not, he was at any rate her officially-appointed guardian, and she would be considered a minor. And in support of his assertion, he quoted Article 367 of the Civil Code, which says: "In the event of the officially-appointed guardian dying without adopting his ward, the said ward shall be furnished during her minority with the means of subsistence from the said guardian's estate," etc., etc.

"An additional reason why I should give up my jewels," said Mademoiselle Marguerite.

The only point that now remained was to decide upon some plan by which she could communicate with her friend, the magistrate, without the knowledge of the General or his wife. The magistrate accordingly explained a system of correspondence which would defy the closest surveillance, and then added: "Now, make haste back to your visitor. Who knows what suspicions your absence may have caused her?"

But Mademoiselle Marguerite had one more request to make. She had often seen in M. de Chalusse's possession a little note-book, in which he entered the names and addresses of the persons with whom he had business transactions. M. Fortunat's address must be there, so she asked and obtained permission to examine this note-book, and to her great joy, under the letter "F," she found the entry: "Fortunat (Isidore), No. 28 Place de la Bourse." "Ah! I'm sure that I shall find Pascal now!" she exclaimed. And after once more thanking the magistrate, she returned to her room again.

Madame de Fondège was awaiting her with feverish impatience. "How long you stayed!" she cried

"I had so many explanations to give, madame."

"How you are tormented, my poor child!"

"Oh, shamefully!"

This furnished Madame de Fondège with another excuse for proffering her advice. But Mademoiselle Marguerite would not allow herself to be convinced at once. She raised a great many objections, and parleyed for a long time before telling Madame de Fondège that she would be happy to accept the hospitality which had been offered her. And her consent was by no means unconditional. She insisted on paying her board, and expressed the wish to retain the services of Madame Léon to whom she was so much attached. The worthy housekeeper was present at this conference. For an instant she had feared that Mademoiselle Marguerite suspected her manœuvres, but her fears were now dispelled, and she even congratulated herself on her skilfulness. Everything was arranged, and the agreement had been sealed with a kiss, when the General returned about four o'clock. "Ah, my dear!" cried his wife, "what happiness! We have a daughter!"

But even this intelligence was scarcely sufficient to revive her husband's drooping spirits. He had almost fainted when he heard the earth falling on M. de Chalusse's coffin; and this display of weakness on the part of a man adorned with such terrible and ferocious moustaches had excited no little comment. "Yes, it is a great happiness!" he now replied. "But thunder and lightning! I never doubted the dear girl's heart!"

Still both he and his wife could scarcely conceal their disappointment when the magistrate informed them that their beloved daughter would not take her diamonds. "Dash it!" growled the General. "I recognise her father in this! What delicacy! almost too much, perhaps!"

However, when the magistrate informed him that the court would undoubtedly order the restitution of the jewels, his face brightened again, and he went down to superintend the removal of Mademoiselle Marguerite's trunks, which were being loaded on one of the vehicles of the establishment.

Then the moment of departure came. Mademoiselle Marguerite acknowledged the parting remarks of the servants, who were secretly delighted to be freed from her presence, and then, before entering the carriage, she cast a long, sad look upon this princely mansion which she had once had the right to believe her own, but which she was alas! now leaving, in all probability, for ever.

END OF PART I.

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THE COUNT'S MILLIONS.

PART II.

LIA D'ARGELÈS.

I.

VENGEANCE! that is the first, the only thought, when a man finds himself victimized, when his honour and fortune, his present and future, are wrecked by a vile conspiracy! The torment he endures under such circumstances can only be alleviated by the prospect of inflicting them a hundredfold upon his persecutors. And nothing seems impossible at the first moment, when hatred surges in the brain, and the foam of anger rises to the lips; no obstacle seems insurmountable, or, rather, none are perceived. But later, when the faculties have regained their equilibrium, one can measure the distance which separates the dream from reality, the project from execution. And on setting to work, how many discouragements arise! The fever of revolt passes by, and the victim wavers. He still breathes bitter vengeance, but he does not act. He despairs, and asks himself what would be the good of it? And in this way the success of villainy is once more assured.

Similar despondency attacked Pascal Ferailleur when he awoke for the first time in the abode where he had hidden himself under the name of Mauméjan. A frightful slander had crushed him to the earth—he could kill his slanderer, but afterwards? How was he to reach and stifle the slander itself? As well try to hold a handful of water; as well try to stay with extended arms the progress of the poisonous breeze which wafts an epidemic on its wings. So the hope that had momentarily lightened his heart faded away again. Since he had received that fatal letter from Madame Léon the evening before, he believed that Marguerite was lost to him for ever, and in this case, it was useless to struggle against fate. What would be the use of victory even if he conquered? Marguerite lost to him—what did the rest matter? Ah! if he had been alone in the world. But he had his mother to think of;—he belonged to this brave-hearted woman, who had saved him from suicide already. "I will not yield, then; I will struggle on for her sake," he muttered, like a man who foresees the futility of his efforts.

He rose, and had nearly finished dressing, when he heard a rap at his chamber door. "It is I, my son," said Madame Ferailleur outside.

Pascal hastened to admit her. "I have come for you because the woman you spoke about last evening is already here, and before employing her, I want your advice."

"Then the woman doesn't please you, mother?"

"I want you to see her."

On entering the little parlour with his mother, Pascal found himself in the presence of a portly pale-faced woman, with thin lips and restless eyes, who bowed obsequiously. It was indeed Madame Vantrasson, the landlady of the model lodging-house, who was seeking employment for the three or four hours which were at her disposal in the morning, she said. It certainly was not for pleasure that she had decided to go out to service again; her dignity suffered terribly by this fall—but then the stomach has to be cared for. Tenants were not numerous at the model lodging-house, in spite of its seductive title; and those who slept there occasionally, almost invariably succeeded in stealing something. Nor did the grocery store pay; the few halfpence which were left there occasionally in exchange for a glass of liquor were pocketed by Vantrasson, who spent them at some neighbouring establishment; for it is a well-known fact that the wine a man drinks in his own shop is always bitter in flavour. So, having no credit at the butcher's or the baker's, Madame Vantrasson was sometimes reduced to living for days together upon the contents of the shop—mouldy figs or dry raisins—which she washed down with torrents of *ratafia*, her only consolation here below.

But this was not a satisfying diet, as she was forced to confess; so she decided to find some work, that would furnish her with food and a little money, which she vowed she would never allow her worthy husband to see.

"What would you charge per month?" inquired Pascal.

She seemed to reflect, and after a great deal of counting on her fingers, she finally declared that she would be content with breakfast and fifteen francs a month, on condition she was allowed to do the marketing. The first question of French cooks, on presenting themselves for a situation, is almost invariably, "Shall I do the marketing?" which of course means, "Shall I have any opportunities for stealing?" Everybody knows this, and nobody is astonished at it.

"I shall do the marketing myself," declared Madame Ferailleur, boldly.

"Then I shall want thirty francs a month," replied Madame Vantrasson, promptly.

Pascal and his mother exchanged glances. They were both unfavourably impressed by this woman, and were equally determined to rid themselves of her, which it was easy enough to do. "Too dear!" said Madame Ferailleur: "I have never given over fifteen francs."

But Madame Vantrasson was not the woman to be easily discouraged, especially as she knew that if she failed to obtain this situation, she might have considerable difficulty in finding another one. She could only hope to obtain employment from strangers and new-comers, who were ignorant of the reputation of the model lodging-house. So in view of softening the hearts of Pascal and his mother, she began to relate the history of her life, skilfully mingling the false with the true, and representing herself as an unfortunate victim of circumstances, and the inhuman cruelty of relatives. For she belonged, like her husband, to a very respectable family, as the Mauméjan's might easily ascertain by inquiry. Vantrasson's sister was the wife of a man named Greloux, who had once been a book-binder in the Rue Saint-Denis, but who had now retired from business with a competency. "Why had this Greloux refused to save them from bankruptcy? Because one could never hope for a favour from relatives," she groaned; "they are jealous if you succeed; and if you are unfortunate, they cast you off."

However, these doleful complaints, far from rendering Madame Vantrasson interesting, imparted a deceitful and most disagreeable expression

to her countenance. "I told you that I could only give fifteen francs," interrupted Madame Ferailleur—"take it or leave it."

Madame Vantrasson protested. She expressed her willingness to deduct five francs from the sum she had named, but more—it was impossible! Would they haggle over ten francs to secure such a treasure as herself, an honest, settled woman, who was entirely devoted to her employers? "Besides, I have been a grand cook in my time," she added, "and I have not lost all my skill. Monsieur and madame would be delighted with my cooking, for I have seen more than one fine gentleman smack his lips over my sauces when I was in the employment of the Count de Chalusse."

Pascal and his mother could not repress a start on hearing this name; but it was in a tone of well-assumed indifference that Madame Ferailleur repeated, "M. de Chalusse?"

"Yes, madame—a count—and so rich that he didn't know how much he was worth. If he were still alive I shouldn't be compelled to go out to service again. But he's dead and he's to be buried this very day." And with an air of profound secrecy, she added: "On going yesterday to the Hôtel de Chalusse to ask for a little help, I heard of the great misfortune. Vantrasson, my husband, accompanied me, and while we were talking with the concierge, a young woman passed through the hall, and he recognised her as a person who some time ago was—well—no better than she should be. Now, however, she's a young lady as lofty as the clouds, and the deceased count has been passing her off as his daughter. Ah! this is a strange world."

Pascal had become whiter than the ceiling. His eyes blazed; and Madame Ferailleur trembled. "Very well," she said, "I will give you twenty-five francs—but on condition you come without complaining if I sometimes require your services of an evening. On these occasions I will give you your dinner." And taking five francs from her pocket she placed them in Madame Vantrasson's hand, adding: "Here is your earnest money."

The other quickly pocketed the coin, not a little surprised by this sudden decision which she had scarcely hoped for, and which she by no means understood. Still she was so delighted with this dénouement that she expressed her willingness to enter upon her duties at once; and to get rid of her Madame Ferailleur was obliged to send her out to purchase the necessary supplies for breakfast. Then, as soon as she was alone with her son, she turned to him and asked: "Well, Pascal?"

But the wretched man seemed turned to stone, and seeing that he neither spoke nor moved, she continued in a severe tone: "Is this the way you keep your resolutions and your oaths! You express your intention of accomplishing a task which requires inexhaustible patience and dissimulation, and at the very first unforeseen circumstance your coolness deserts you, and you lose your head completely. If it had not been for me you would have betrayed yourself in that woman's presence. You must renounce your revenge, and tamely submit to be conquered by the Marquis de Valorsay if your face is to be an open book in which any one may read your secret plans and thoughts."

Pascal shook his head dejectedly. "Didn't you hear, mother?" he faltered.

"Hear what?"

"What that vile woman said? This young lady whom she spoke of, whom her husband recognised, can be none other than Marguerite."

"I am sure of it."

He recoiled in horror. "You are sure of it!" he repeated; "and you can tell me this unmoved—coldly, as if it were a natural, a possible thing.

Didn't you understand the shameful meaning of her insinuations? Didn't you see her hypocritical smile and the malice gleaming in her eyes?" He pressed his hands to his burning brow, and groaned: "And I did not crush the infamous wretch! I did not fell her to the ground!"

Ah! if she had obeyed the impulse of her heart, Madame Ferailleur would have thrown her arms round her son's neck, and have mingled her tears with his, but reason prevailed. The worthy woman's heart was pervaded with that lofty sentiment of duty which sustains the humble heroines of the fireside, and lends them even more courage than the reckless adventurers whose names are recorded by history could boast of. She felt that Pascal must not be consoled, but spurred on to fresh efforts; and so mustering all her courage, she said: "Are you acquainted with Mademoiselle Marguerite's past life? No. You only know that hers has been a life of great vicissitudes—and so it is not strange that she should be slandered."

"In that case, mother," said Pascal, "you were wrong to interrupt Madame Vantrasson. She would probably have told us many things."

"I interrupted her, it is true, and sent her away—and you know why. But she is in our service now; and when you are calm, when you have regained your senses, nothing will prevent you from questioning her. It may be useful for you to know who this man Vantrasson is, and how and where he met Mademoiselle Marguerite."

Shame, sorrow, and rage, brought tears to Pascal's eyes. "My God!" he exclaimed, "to be reduced to the unspeakable misery of hearing my mother doubt Marguerite!" He did not doubt her. *He* could have listened to the most infamous accusations against her without feeling a single doubt. However, Madame Ferailleur had sufficient self-control to shrug her shoulders. "Ah, well! silence this slander," she exclaimed. "I wish for nothing better; but don't forget that we have ourselves to rehabilitate. To crush your enemies will be far more profitable to Mademoiselle Marguerite than vain threats and weak lamentations. It seemed to me that you had sworn to act, not to complain."

This ironical thrust touched Pascal's sensitive mind to the quick; he rose at once to his feet, and coldly said, "That's true. I thank you for having recalled me to myself."

She made no rejoinder, but mentally thanked God. She had read her son's heart, and perceiving his hesitation and weakness she had supplied the stimulus he needed. Now she saw him as she wished to see him. Now he was ready to reproach himself for his lack of courage and his weakness in displaying his feelings. And as a test of his powers of endurance, he decided not to question Madame Vantrasson till four or five days had elapsed. If her suspicions had been aroused, this delay would suffice to dispel them.

He said but little during breakfast; for he was now eager to commence the struggle. He longed to act, and yet he scarcely knew how to begin the campaign. First of all he must study the enemy's position—gain some knowledge of the men he had to deal with, find out exactly who the Marquis de Valorsay and the Viscount de Coralth were. Where could he obtain information respecting these two men? Should he be compelled to follow them and to gather up here and there such scraps of intelligence as came in his way? This method of proceeding would be slow and inconvenient in the extreme. He was revolving the subject in his mind when he suddenly remembered the man who, on the morning that followed the scene at Madame d'Argelès' house, had come to him in the Rue d'Ulm to

give him a proof of his confidence. He remembered that this strange man had said: "If you ever need a helping hand, come to me." And at the recollection he made up his mind. "I am going to Baron Trigault's," he remarked to his mother; "if my presentiments don't deceive me, he will be of service to us."

In less than half an hour he was on his way. He had dressed himself in the oldest clothes he possessed: and this, with the change he had made by cutting off his hair and beard, had so altered his appearance that it was necessary to look at him several times, and most attentively, to recognise him. The visiting cards which he carried in his pocket bore the inscription: "P. Mauméjan, Business Agent, Route de la Révolte." His knowledge of Parisian life had induced him to choose the same profession as M. Fortunat followed—a profession which opens almost every door. "I will enter the nearest *café* and ask for a directory," he said to himself. "I shall certainly find Baron Trigault's address in it."

The baron lived in the Rue de la Ville-l'Evêque. His mansion was one of the largest and most magnificent in the opulent district of the Madeleine, and its aspect was perfectly in keeping with its owner's character as an expert financier, and a shrewd manufacturer, the possessor of valuable mines. The marvellous luxury so surprised Pascal, that he asked himself how the owner of this princely abode could find any pleasure at the gaming table of the Hôtel d'Argelès. Five or six footmen were lounging about the courtyard when he entered it. He walked straight up to one of them, and with his hat in his hand, asked: "Baron Trigault, if you please?"

If he had asked for the Grand Turk the valet would not have looked at him with greater astonishment. His surprise, indeed, seemed so profound that Pascal feared he had made some mistake and added: "Doesn't he live here?"

The servant laughed heartily. "This is certainly his house," he replied, "and strange to say, by some fortunate chance, he's here."

"I wish to speak with him on business."

The servant called one of his colleagues. "Eh! Florestan—is the baron receiving?"

"The baroness hasn't forbidden it."

This seemed to satisfy the footman; for, turning to Pascal he said: "In that case, you can follow me."

II.

THE sumptuous interior of the Trigault mansion was on a par with its external magnificence. Even the entrance bespoke the lavish millionaire, eager to conquer difficulties, jealous of achieving the impossible, and never haggling when his fancies were concerned. The spacious hall, paved with costly mosaics, had been transformed into a conservatory full of flowers, which were renewed every morning. Rare plants climbed the walls up gilded trellis work, or hung from the ceiling in vases of rare old china, while from among the depths of verdure peered forth exquisite statues, the work of sculptors of renown. On a rustic bench sat a couple of tall footmen, as bright in their gorgeous liveries as gold coins fresh from the mint; still, despite their splendour, they were stretching and yawning to such a degree, that it seemed as if they would ultimately dislocate their jaws and arms.

"Tell me," inquired the servant who was escorting Pascal, "can any one speak to the baron?"

"Why?"

"This gentleman has something to say to him."

The two valets eyed the unknown visitor, plainly considering him to be one of those persons who have no existence for the menials of fashionable establishments, and finally burst into a hearty laugh. "Upon my word!" exclaimed the eldest, "he's just in time. Announce him, and madame will be greatly obliged to you. She and monsieur have been quarrelling for a good half-hour. And, heavenly powers, isn't he tantalising!"

The most intense curiosity gleamed in the eyes of Pascal's conductor, and with an air of secrecy, he asked: "What is the cause of the rumpus? That Fernand, no doubt—or some one else?"

"No; this morning it's about M. Van Klopen."

"Madame's dressmaker?"

"The same. Monsieur and madame were breakfasting together—a most unusual thing—when M. Van Klopen made his appearance. I thought to myself, when I admitted him: 'Look out for storms!' I scented one in the air, and in fact the dressmaker hadn't been in the room five minutes before we heard the baron's voice rising higher and higher. I said to myself: 'Whew! the mantua-maker is presenting his bill!' Madame cried and went on like mad; but, pshaw! when the master really begins, there's no one like him. There isn't a cab-driver in Paris who's his equal for swearing."

"And M. Van Klopen?"

"Oh, he's used to such scenes! When gentlemen abuse him he does the same as dogs do when they come up out of the water; he just shakes his head and troubles himself no more about it. He has decidedly the best of the row. He has furnished the goods, and he'll have to be paid sooner or later—"

"What! hasn't he been paid then?"

"I don't know; he's still here."

A terrible crash of breaking china interrupted this edifying conversation. "There!" exclaimed one of the footmen, "that's monsieur; he has smashed two or three hundred francs' worth of dishes. He *must* be rich to pay such a price for his angry fits."

"Well," observed the other, "if I were in monsieur's place I should be angry too. Would you let your wife have her dresses fitted on by a man? I says that it's indecent. I'm only a servant, but—"

"Nonsense, it's the fashion. Besides, monsieur does not care about that. A man who—"

He stopped short; in fact, the others had motioned him to be silent. The baron was surrounded by exceptional servants, and the presence of a stranger acted as a restraint upon them. For this reason, one of them, after asking Pascal for his card, opened a door and ushered him into a small room, saying: "I will go and inform the baron. Please wait here."

"Here," as he called it, was a sort of smoking-room hung with cashmere of fantastic design and gorgeous hues, and encircled by a low cushioned divan, covered with the same material. A profusion of rare and costly objects was to be seen on all sides, armour, statuary, pictures, and richly ornamented weapons. But Pascal, already amazed by the conversation of the servants, did not think of examining these objects of *virtu*. Through a partially open doorway, directly opposite the one he had entered by, came

the sound of loud voices in excited conversation. Baron Trigault, the baroness, and the famous Van Klopen were evidently in the adjoining room. It was a woman, the baroness, who was speaking, and the quivering of her clear and somewhat shrill voice betrayed a violent irritation, which was only restrained with the greatest difficulty. "It is hard for the wife of one of the richest men in Paris to see a bill for absolute necessities disputed in this style," she was saying.

A man's voice, with a strong Teutonic accent, the voice of Van Klopen, the Hollander, caught up the refrain. "Yes, strict necessities, one can swear to that. And if, before flying into a passion, Monsieur le Baron had taken the trouble to glance over my little bill, he would have seen—"

"No more! You bore me to death. Besides I haven't time to listen to your nonsense; they are waiting for me to play a game of whist at the club."

This time it was the master of the house, Baron Trigault, who spoke, and Pascal recognised his voice instantly.

"If monsieur would only allow me to read the items. It will take but a moment," rejoined Van Klopen. And as if he had construed the oath that answered him as an exclamation of assent, he began: "In June, a Hungarian costume with jacket and sash, two train dresses with upper skirts and trimmings of lace, a Medicis polonaise, a jockey costume, a walking costume, a riding-habit, two morning-dresses, a Velléda costume, an evening dress."

"I was obliged to attend the races very frequently during the month of June," remarked the baroness.

But the illustrious adorner of female loveliness had already resumed his reading. "In July we have: two morning jackets, one promenade costume, one sailor suit, one Watteau shepherdess costume, one ordinary bathing-suit, with material for parasol and shoes to match, one Pompadour bathing-suit, one dressing-gown, one close-fitting Medicis mantle, two opera cloaks—"

"And I was certainly not the most elegantly attired of the ladies at Trouville, where I spent the month of July," interrupted the baroness.

"There are but few entries in the month of August," continued Van Klopen. "We have: a morning-dress, a travelling-dress, with trimmings—" And he went on and on, gasping for breath, rattling off the ridiculous names which he gave to his "creations," and interrupted every now and then by the blow of a clinched fist on the table, or by a savage oath.

Pascal stood in the smoking-room, motionless with astonishment. He did not know what surprised him the most, Van Klopen's impudence in daring to read such a bill, the foolishness of the woman who had ordered all these things, or the patience of the husband who was undoubtedly going to pay for them. At last, after what seemed an interminable enumeration, Van Klopen exclaimed: "And that's all!"

"Yes, that's all," repeated the baroness, like an echo.

"That's all!" exclaimed the baron—"that's all! That is to say, in four months, at least seven hundred yards of silk, velvet, satin, and muslin, have been put on this woman's back!"

"The dresses of the present day require a great deal of material. Monsieur le Baron will understand that flounces, puffs, and ruches—"

"Naturally! Total, twenty-seven thousand francs!"

"Excuse me! Twenty-seven thousand nine hundred and thirty-three francs, ninety centimes."

"Call it twenty-eight thousand francs then. Ah, well, M. Van Klopen, if you are ever paid for this rubbish it won't be by me."

If Van Klopen was expecting this dénouement, Pascal wasn't; in fact, he was so startled, that an exclamation escaped him which would have betrayed his presence under almost any other circumstances. What amazed him most was the baron's perfect calmness, following, as it did, such a fit of furious passion, violent enough even to be heard in the vestibule. "Either he has extraordinary control over himself or this scene conceals some mystery," thought Pascal.

Meanwhile the man milliner continued to urge his claims—but the baron, instead of replying, only whistled; and wounded by this breach of good manners, Van Klopen at last exclaimed: "I have had dealings with all the distinguished men in Europe, and never before did one of them refuse to pay me for his wife's toilettes."

"Very well—I don't pay for them—there's the difference. Do you suppose that I, Baron Trigault, that I've worked like a negro for twenty years merely for the purpose of aiding your charming and useful branch of industry? Gather up your papers, Mr. Ladies' Tailor. There may be husbands who believe themselves responsible for their wives' follies—it's quite possible there are—but I'm not made of that kind of stuff. I allow Madame Trigault eight thousand francs a month for her toilette—that is sufficient—and it is a matter for you and her to arrange together. What did I tell you last year when I paid a bill of forty thousand francs? That I would not be responsible for any more of my wife's debts. And I not only said it, I formally notified to you through my private secretary."

"I remember, indeed—"

"Then why do you come to me with your bill? It is with my wife that you have opened an account. Apply to her, and leave me in peace."

"Madame promised me—"

"Teach her to keep her promises."

"It costs a great deal to retain one's position as a leader of fashion; and many of the most distinguished ladies are obliged to run into debt," urged Van Klopen.

"That's their business. But my wife is not a fine lady. She is simply Madame Trigault, a baroness, thanks to her husband's gold and the condescension of a worthy German prince, who was in want of money. *She* is not a person of consequence—she has no rank to keep up."

The baroness must have attached immense importance to the satisfying of Van Klopen's demands, for concealing the anger this humiliating scene undoubtedly caused her, she condescended to try and explain, and even to entreat. "I have been a little extravagant, perhaps," she said; "but I will be more prudent in future. Pay, monsieur—pay just once more."

"No!"

"If not for my sake, for your own."

"Not a farthing."

By the baron's tone, Pascal realised that his wife would never shake his fixed determination. Such must also have been the opinion of the illustrious ruler of fashion, for he returned to the charge with an argument he had held in reserve. "If this is the case, I shall, to my great regret, be obliged to fail in the respect I owe to Monsieur le Baron, and to place this bill in the hands of a solicitor."

"Send him along—send him along."

"I cannot believe that monsieur wishes a law-suit."

"In that you are greatly mistaken. Nothing would please me better. It would at last give me an opportunity to say what I think about your dealings. Do *you* think that wives are to turn their husbands into machines for supplying money? You draw the bow string too tightly, my dear fellow —it will break. I'll proclaim on the house-top what others dare not say, and we'll see if I don't succeed in organising a little crusade against you." And animated by the sound of his own words, his anger came back to him, and in a louder and ever louder voice he continued: "Ah! you prate of the scandal that would be created by my resistance to your demands. That's your system; but, with me, it won't succeed. You threaten me with a law-suit; very good. I'll take it upon myself to enlighten Paris, for I know your secrets, Mr. Dressmaker. I know the goings on in your establishment. It isn't always to talk about dress that ladies stop at your place on returning from the Bois. You sell silks and satins no doubt; but you sell Madeira, and excellent cigarettes as well, and there are some who don't walk very straight on leaving your establishment, but smell suspiciously of tobacco and absinthe. Oh, yes, let us go to law, by all means! I shall have an advocate who will know how to explain the parts your customers play, and who will reveal how, with your assistance, they obtain money from other sources than their husband's cash-box."

When M. Van Klopen was addressed in this style, he was not at all pleased. "And I!" he exclaimed, "I will tell people that Baron Trigault, after losing all his money at play, repays his creditors with curses."

The noise of an overturned chair told Pascal that the baron had sprung up in a furious passion. "You may say what you like, you rascally fool! but not in my house," he shouted. "Leave—leave or I will ring—"

"Monsieur—"

"Leave, leave, I tell you, or I sha'n't have the patience to wait for a servant!"

He must have joined action to word, and have seized Van Klopen by the collar to thrust him into the hall, for Pascal heard a sound of scuffling, a series of oaths worthy of a coal heaver, two or three frightened cries from the baroness, and several guttural exclamations in German. Then a door closed with such violence that the whole house shook, and a magnificent clock, fixed to the wall of the smoking-room, fell on to the floor.

If Pascal had not heard this scene, he would have deemed it incredible. How could one suppose that a creditor would leave this princely mansion with his bill unpaid? But more and more clearly he understood that there must be some greater cause of difference between husband and wife than this bill of twenty-eight thousand francs. For what was this amount to a confirmed gambler who, without as much as a frown, gained or lost a fortune every evening of his life. Evidently there was some skeleton in this household —one of those terrible secrets which make a man and his wife enemies, and all the more bitter enemies as they are bound together by a chain which it is impossible to break. And undoubtedly, a good many of the insults which the baron had heaped upon Van Klopen must have been intended for the baroness. These thoughts darted through Pascal's mind with the rapidity of lightning, and showed him the horrible position in which he was placed. The baron, who had been so favourably disposed towards him, and from whom he was expecting a great service, would undoubtedly hate him, undoubtedly become his enemy, when he learned that he had been a listener, although an involuntary one, to this conversation with Van Klopen. How

did it happen that he had been placed in this dangerous position? What had become of the footman who had taken his card? These were questions which he was unable to answer. And what was he to do? If he could have retired noiselessly, if he could have reached the courtyard and have made his escape without being observed he would not have hesitated. But was this plan practicable? And would not his card betray him? Would it not be discovered sooner or later that he had been in the smoking-room while M. Van Klopen was in the dining-room? In any case, delicacy of feeling as well as his own interest forbade him to remain any longer a listener to the private conversation of the baron and his wife.

He therefore noisily moved a chair, and coughed in that affected style which means in every country: "Take care—I'm here!" But he did not succeed in attracting attention. And yet the silence was profound; he could distinctly hear the creaking of the baron's boots, as he paced to and fro, and the sound of fingers nervously beating a tattoo on the table. If he desired to avoid hearing the confidential conversation, which would no doubt ensue between the baron and his wife, there was but one course for him to pursue, and that was to reveal his presence at once. He was about to do so, when some one opened a door which must have led from the hall into the dining-room. He listened attentively but only heard a few confused words, to which the baron replied: "Very well. That's sufficient. I will see him in a moment."

Pascal breathed freely once more. "They have just given him my card," he thought. "I can remain now; he will come here in a moment."

The baron must really have started to leave the room, for his wife exclaimed: "One word more: have you quite decided?"

"Oh, fully!"

"You are resolved to leave me exposed to the persecutions of my dressmaker?"

"Van Klopen is too charming and polite to cause you the least worry."

"You will brave the disgrace of a law suit?"

"Nonsense! You know very well that he won't bring any action against me—unfortunately. And, besides, pray tell me where the disgrace would be? I have a foolish wife—is that my fault? I oppose her absurd extravagance—haven't I a right to do so? If all husbands were as courageous, we should soon close the establishments of these artful men, who minister to your vanity, and use you ladies as puppets, or living advertisements, to display the absurd fashions which enrich them."

The baron took two or three more steps forward, as if about to leave the room, but his wife interposed: "The Baroness Trigault, whose husband has an income of seven or eight hundred thousand francs a year, can't go about clad like a simple woman of the middle classes."

"I should see nothing so very improper in that."

"Oh, I know. Only your ideas don't coincide with mine. I shall never consent to make myself ridiculous among the ladies of my set—among my friends."

"It would indeed be a pity to arouse the disapproval of your friends."

This sneering remark certainly irritated the baroness, for it was with the greatest vehemence that she replied: "All my friends are ladies of the highest rank in society—noble ladies!"

The baron no doubt shrugged his shoulders, for in a tone of crushing irony and scorn, he exclaimed: "Noble ladies! whom do you call noble ladies pray? The brainless fools who only think of displaying themselves

and making themselves notorious?—the senseless idiots who pique themselves on surpassing lewd women in audacity, extravagance, and effrontery, who fleece their husbands as cleverly as courtesans fleece their lovers? Noble ladies! who drink, and smoke, and carouse, who attend masked balls, and talk slang! Noble ladies! the idiots who long for the applause of the crowd, and consider notoriety to be desirable and flattering. A woman is only noble by her virtues—and the chief of all virtues, modesty, is entirely wanting in your illustrious friends—"

"Monsieur," interrupted the baroness, in a voice husky with anger, "you forget yourself—you—"

But the baron was well under way. "If it is scandal that crowns one a great lady, you *are* one—and one of the greatest; for you are notorious—almost as notorious as Jenny Fancy. Can't I learn from the newspapers all your sayings and gestures, your amusements, your occupations, and the toilettes you wear? It is impossible to read of a first performance at a theatre, or of a horse-race, without finding your name coupled with that of Jenny Fancy, or Cora Pearl, or Ninette Simplon. I should be a very strange husband indeed, if I wasn't proud and delighted. Ah! you are a treasure to the reporters. On the day before yesterday the Baroness Trigault skated in the Bois. Yesterday she was driving in her pony-carriage. To-day she distinguished herself by her skill at pigeon-shooting. To-morrow she will display herself half nude in some *tableaux vivants*. On the day after to-morrow she will inaugurate a new style of hair-dressing, and take part in a comedy. It is always the Baroness Trigault who is the observed of all observers at Vincennes. The Baroness Trigault has lost five hundred louis in betting. The Baroness Trigault uses her lorgnette with charming impertinence. It is she who has declared it proper form to take a 'drop' on returning from the Bois. No one is so famed for 'form,' as the baroness—and silk merchants have bestowed her name upon a colour. People rave of the Trigault blue—what glory! There are also *costumes Trigault*, for the witty, elegant baroness has a host of admirers who follow her everywhere, and loudly sing her praises. This is what I, a plain, honest man, read every day in the newspapers. The whole world not only knows how my wife dresses, but how she looks *en dishabille*, and how she is formed; folks are aware that she has an exquisite foot, a divinely-shaped leg, and a perfect hand. No one is ignorant of the fact that my wife's shoulders are of dazzling whiteness, and that high on the left shoulder there is a most enticing little mole. I had the satisfaction of reading this particular last evening. It is charming upon my word! and I am truly a fortunate man!"

In the smoking-room, Pascal could hear the baroness angrily stamp her foot, as she exclaimed: "It is an outrageous insult—your journalists are most impertinent."

"Why? Do they ever trouble honest women?"

"They wouldn't trouble me if I had a husband who knew how to make them treat me with respect!"

The baron laughed a strident, nervous laugh, which it was not pleasant to hear, and which revealed the fact that intense suffering was hidden beneath all this banter. "Would you like me to fight a duel then? After twenty years has the idea of ridding yourself of me occurred to you again? I can scarcely believe it. You know too well that you would receive none of my money, that I have guarded against that. Besides, you would be inconsolable if the newspapers ceased talking about you for a single day.

Respect yourself, and you will be respected. The publicity you complain of is the last anchor which prevents society from drifting one knows not where. Those who would not listen to the warning voice of honour and conscience are restrained by the fear of a little paragraph which might disclose their shame. Now that a woman no longer has a conscience, the newspapers act in place of it. And I think it quite right, for it is our only hope of salvation."

By the stir in the adjoining room, Pascal felt sure that the baroness had stationed herself before the door to prevent her husband from leaving her. "Ah! well, monsieur," she exclaimed, "I declare to you that I must have Van Klopen's twenty-eight thousand francs before this evening. I will have them, too; I am resolved to have them, and you will give them to me."

"Oh!" thundered the baron, "you *will* have them—you will—" He paused, and then, after a moment's reflection, he said; "Very well. So be it! I will give you this amount, but not just now. Still if, as you say, it is absolutely necessary that you should have it to-day, there is a means of procuring it. Pawn your diamonds for thirty thousand francs—I authorise you to do so; and I give you my word of honour that I will redeem them within a week. Say, will you do this?" And, as the baroness made no reply, he continued: "You don't answer! shall I tell you why? It is because your diamonds were long since sold and replaced by imitation ones; it is because you are head over heels in debt; it is because you have stooped so low as to borrow your maid's savings; it is because you already owe three thousand francs to one of my coachmen; it is because our steward lends you money at the rate of thirty or forty per cent."

"It is false!"

The baron sneered. "You certainly must think me a much greater fool than I really am!" he replied. "I'm not often at home, it's true—the sight of you exasperates me; but I know what's going on. You believe me your dupe, but you are altogether mistaken. It is not twenty-seven thousand francs you owe Van Klopen, but fifty or sixty thousand. However, he is careful not to demand payment. If he brought me a bill this morning, it was only because you had begged him to do so, and because it had been agreed he should give you the money back if I paid him. In short, if you require twenty-eight thousand francs before to-night, it is because M. Fernand de Coralth has demanded that sum, and because you have promised to give it to him!"

Leaning against the wall of the smoking-room, speechless and motionless, holding his breath, with his hands pressed upon his heart, as if to stop its throbbings, Pascal Ferailleur listened. He no longer thought of flying; he no longer thought of reproaching himself for his enforced indiscretion. He had lost all consciousness of his position. The name of the Viscount de Coralth, thus mentioned in the course of this frightful scene, came as a revelation to him. He now understood the meaning of the baron's conduct. His visit to the Rue d'Ulm, and his promises of help were all explained. "My mother was right," he thought; "the baron hates that miserable viscount mortally. He will do all in his power to assist me."

Meanwhile the baroness energetically denied her husband's charges. She swore that she did not know what he meant. What had M. de Coralth to do with all this? She commanded her husband to speak more plainly—to explain his odious insinuations.

He allowed her to speak for a moment, and then suddenly, in a harsh, sarcastic voice, he interrupted her by saying: "Oh! enough! No more

hypocrisy! Why do you try to defend yourself? What matters one crime more? I know only too well that what I say is true; and if you desire proofs, they shall be in your hands in less than half an hour. It is a long time since I was blind—full twenty years! Nothing concerning you has escaped my knowledge and observation since the cursed day when I discovered the depths of your disgrace and infamy—since the terrible evening when I heard you plan to murder me in cold blood. You had grown accustomed to freedom of action; while I, who had gone off with the first gold-seekers, was braving a thousand dangers in California, so as to win wealth and luxury for you more quickly. Fool that I was! No task seemed too hard or too distasteful when I thought of you—and I was always thinking of you. My mind was at peace—I had perfect faith in you. We had a daughter; and if a fear or a doubt entered my mind, I told myself that the sight of her cradle would drive all evil thoughts from your heart. The adultery of a childless wife may be forgiven or explained; but that of a mother, never! Fool! idiot! that I was! With what joyous pride, on my return after an absence of eighteen months, I showed you the treasures I had brought back with me! I had two hundred thousand francs! I said to you as I embraced you: 'It is yours, my well-beloved, the source of all my happiness!' But you did not care for me—I wearied you! You loved another! And while you were deceiving me with your caresses, you were, with fiendish skill, preparing a conspiracy which, if it had succeeded, would have resulted in my death! I should consider myself amply revenged if I could make you suffer for a single day all the torments that I endured for long months. For this was not all! You had not even the excuse, if excuse it be, of a powerful, all-absorbing passion. Convinced of your treachery, I resolved to ascertain everything, and I discovered that in my absence you had become a mother. Why didn't I kill you? How did I have the courage to remain silent and conceal what I knew? Ah! it was because, by watching you, I hoped to discover the cursed bastard and your accomplice. It was because I dreamed of a vengeance as terrible as the offence. I said to myself that the day would come when, at any risk, you would try to see your child again, to embrace her, and provide for her future. Fool! fool that I was! You had already forgotten her! When you received news of my intended return, she was sent to some foundling asylum, or left to die upon some door-step. Have you ever thought of her? Have you ever asked what has become of her? ever asked yourself if she has needed bread while you have been living in almost regal luxury? ever asked yourself into what depths of vice she may have fallen?"

"Always the same ridiculous accusation!" exclaimed the baroness.

"Yes, always!"

"You must know, however, that this story of a child is only a vile slander. I told you so when you spoke of it to me a dozen years afterwards. I have repeated it a thousand times since."

The baron uttered a sigh that was very like a sob, and without paying any heed to his wife's words, he continued: "If I consented to allow you to remain under my roof, it was only for the sake of our daughter. I trembled lest the scandal of a separation should fall upon her. But it was useless suffering on my part. She was as surely lost as you yourself were; and it was your work, too!"

"What! you blame me for that?"

"Whom ought I to blame, then? Who took her to balls, and theatres

and races—to every place where a young girl ought *not* to be taken? Who initiated her into what you call high life? and who used her as a discreet and easy chaperon? Who married her to a wretch who is a disgrace to the title he bears, and who has completed the work of demoralisation you began? And what is your daughter to-day? Her extravagance has made her notorious even among the shameless women who pretend to be leaders of society. She is scarcely twenty-two, and there is not a single prejudice left for her to brave! Her husband is the companion of actresses and courtesans; her own companions are no better—and in less than two years the million of francs which I bestowed on her as a dowry has been squandered, recklessly squandered—for there isn't a penny of it left. And, at this very hour, my daughter and my son-in-law are plotting to extort money from me. On the day before yesterday—listen carefully to this—my son-in-law came to ask me for a hundred thousand francs, and when I refused them, he threatened if I did not give them to him that he would publish some letters written by my daughter—by his wife—to some low scoundrel. I was horrified and gave him what he asked. But that same evening I learned that the husband and wife, my daughter and my son-in-law, had concocted this vile conspiracy together. Yes, I have positive proofs of it. Leaving here, and not wishing to return home that day, he telegraphed the good news to his wife. But in his delight he made a mistake in the address, and the telegram was brought here. I opened it, and read: 'Papa has fallen into the trap, my darling. I beat my drum, and he surrendered at once.' Yes, that is what he dared to write, and sign with his own name, and then send to his wife—my daughter!"

Pascal was absolutely terrified. He wondered if he were not the victim of some absurd nightmare—if his senses were not playing him false. He had little conception of the terrible dramas which are constantly enacted in these superb mansions, so admired and envied by the passing crowd. He thought that the baroness would be crushed—that she would fall on her knees before her husband. What a mistake! The tone of her voice told him that, instead of yielding, she was only bent on retaliation.

"Does your son-in-law do anything worse than you?" she exclaimed. "How dare you censure him—you who drag your name through all the gambling dens of Europe?"

"Wretch!" interrupted the baron, "wretch!" But quickly mastering himself, he remarked: "Yes, it's true that I gamble. People say, 'That great Baron Trigault is never without cards in his hands!' But you know very well that I really hold gambling in horror—that I loathe it. But when I play, I sometimes forget—for I must forget. I tried drink, but it wouldn't drown thought, so I had recourse to cards; and when the stakes are large, and my fortune is imperilled, I sometimes lose consciousness of my misery!"

The baroness gave vent to a cold, sneering laugh, and, in a tone of mocking commiseration, she said: "Poor baron! It is no doubt in the hope of forgetting your sorrows that you spend all your time—when you are not gambling—with a woman named Lia d'Argelès. She's rather pretty. I have seen her several times in the Bois—"

"Be silent!" exclaimed the baron, "be silent! Don't insult an unfortunate woman who is a thousand times better than yourself." And, feeling that he could endure no more—that he could no longer restrain his passion, he cried: "Out of my sight! Go! or I sha'n't be responsible for my acts!"

Pascal heard a chair move, the floor creak, and a moment afterwards a lady passed quickly through the smoking-room. How was it that she did not perceive him? No doubt, because she was greatly agitated, in spite of her bravado. And, besides, he was standing a little back in the shade. But he saw her, and his brain reeled. "Good Lord! what a likeness!" he murmured.

III.

It was as if he had seen an apparition, and he was vainly striving to drive away a terrible, mysterious fear, when a heavy footfall made the floor of the dining-room creak anew. The noise restored him to consciousness of his position. "It is the baron!" he thought; "he is coming this way! If he finds me here I am lost; he will never consent to help me. A man would never forgive another man for hearing what I have just heard."

Why should he not try to make his escape? The card, bearing the name of Mauméjan, would be no proof of his visit. He could see the baron somewhere else some other day—elsewhere than at his own house, so that he need not fear the recognition of the servants. These thoughts flashed through his mind, and he was about to fly, when a harsh cry held him spell-bound. Baron Trigault was standing on the threshold. His emotion, as is almost always the case with corpulent people, was evinced by a frightful distortion of his features. His face was transformed, his lips had become perfectly white, and his eyes seemed to be starting from their sockets. "How came you here?" he asked, in a husky voice.

"Your servants ushered me into this room."

"Who are you?"

"What! monsieur, don't you recognise me?" rejoined Pascal, who in his agitation forgot that the baron had seen him only twice before. He forgot the absence of his beard, his almost ragged clothing, and all the precautions he had taken to render recognition impossible.

"I have never met any person named Mauméjan," said the baron.

"Ah! monsieur, that's not my name. Have you forgotten the innocent man who was caught in that infamous snare set for him by the Viscount de Coralth?"

"Yes, yes," replied the baron, "I remember you now." And then recollecting the terrible scene that had just taken place in the adjoining room: "How long have you been here?" he asked.

Should Pascal tell a falsehood, or confess the truth? He hesitated, but his hesitation lasted scarcely the tenth part of a second. "I have been here about half an hour," he replied.

The baron's livid cheeks suddenly became purple, his eyes glittered, and it seemed by his threatening gesture as if he were strongly tempted to murder this man, who had discovered the terrible, disgraceful secrets of his domestic life. But it was a mere flash of energy. The terrible ordeal which he had just passed through had exhausted him mentally and physically, and it was in a faltering voice that he resumed: "Then you have not lost a word—a word of what was said in the other room?"

"Not a word."

The baron sank on to the divan. "So the knowledge of my disgrace is no longer confined to myself!" he exclaimed. "A stranger's eye has penetrated the depths of misery I have fallen into! The secret of my wretchedness and shame is mine no longer!"

"Oh, monsieur, monsieur!" interrupted Pascal. "Before I recross the threshold of your home, all shall have been forgotten. I swear it by all that is most sacred!"

He had raised his hand as if to take a solemn oath, when the baron caught hold of it, and, pressing it with sorrowful gratitude, exclaimed: "I believe you! You are a man of honour—I only needed to see your home to be convinced of that. You will not laugh at my misfortunes or my misery!" He must have been suffering frightfully, for big tears rolled slowly down his cheeks. "What have I done, my God! that I should be so cruelly punished?" he continued. "I have always been generous and charitable, and ready to help all who applied to me. I am utterly alone! I have a wife and a daughter—but they hate me. They long for my death, which would give them possession of my wealth. What torture! For months together I dared not eat a morsel of food, either in my own house, or in the house of my son-in-law. I feared poison; and I never partook of a dish until I had seen my daughter or my wife do so. To prevent a crime, I was obliged to resort to the strangest expedients. I made a will, and left my property in such a way that if I die, my family will not receive one penny. So, they now have an interest in prolonging my life." As he spoke he sprang up with an almost frenzied air, and, seizing Pascal by the arm, again continued. "Nor is this all! This woman—my wife—you know—you have heard the extent of her shame and degradation. Ah well! —I love her!"

Pascal recoiled with an exclamation of mingled horror and consternation.

"This amazes you, eh?" rejoined the baron. "It is indeed incomprehensible, monstrous—but it is the truth. It is to gratify her desire for luxury that I have toiled to amass millions. If I purchased a title, which is absurd and ridiculous, it was only because I wished to satisfy her vanity. Do what she may, I can only see in her the chaste and beautiful wife of our early married life. It is cowardly, absurd, ridiculous—I realise it; but my love is stronger than my reason or my will. I love her madly, passionately; I cannot tear her from my heart!"

So speaking, he sank sobbing on to the divan again. Was this, indeed, the frivolous and jovial Baron Trigault whom Pascal had seen at Madame d'Argelès' house—the man of self-satisfied mien and superb assurance, the good-natured cynic, the frequenter of gambling-dens? Alas, yes! But the baron whom the world knew was only a comedian; this was the real man.

After a little while he succeeded in controlling his emotion, and in a comparatively calm voice he exclaimed: "But it is useless to distract one's mind with an incurable evil. Let us speak of yourself, M. Ferailleur. To what do I owe the honour of this visit?"

"To your own kind offer, monsieur, and the hope that you will help me in refuting this slander, and wreaking vengeance upon those who have ruined me."

"Oh! yes, I will help you in that to the full extent of my power," exclaimed the baron. But experience reminded him that confidential disclosures ought not to be made with the doors open, so he rose, shut them, and returning to Pascal, said: "Explain in what way I can be of service to you, monsieur?"

It was not without many misgivings that Pascal had presented himself at the baron's house, but after what he had heard he felt no further hesitation; he could speak with perfect freedom. "It is quite unnecessary for

me to tell you, Monsieur le Baron," he began, "that the cards which made me win were inserted in the pack by M. de Coralth—that is proven beyond question, and whatever the consequences may be, I shall have my revenge. But before striking him, I wish to reach the man whose instrument he was."

"What! you suppose—"

"I don't suppose—I am sure that M. de Coralth acted in obedience to the instructions of some other scoundrel whose courage does not equal his meanness."

"Perhaps so! I think he would shrink from nothing in the way of rascality. But who could have employed him in this vile work of dishonouring an honest man?"

"The Marquis de Valorsay."

On hearing this name, the baron bounded to his feet. "Impossible!" he exclaimed; "absolutely impossible! M. de Valorsay is incapable of the villainy you ascribe to him. What do I say?—he is even above suspicion. I have known him for years, and I have never met a more loyal, more honourable, or more courageous man. He is one of my few trusted friends; we see each other almost every day. I am expecting a visit from him even now."

"Still it was he who incited M. de Coralth to do the deed."

"But why? What could have been his object?"

"To win a young girl whom I love. She—loved me, and he saw that I was an obstacle. He put me out of the way more surely than if he had murdered me. If I died, she might mourn for me—dishonoured, she would spurn me—"

"Is Valorsay so madly in love with the girl, then?"

"I think he cares but very little for her."

"Then why—"

"She is the heiress of several millions."

It was evident that this explanation did not shake Baron Trigault's faith in his friend. "But the marquis has an income of a hundred and fifty or two hundred thousand francs," said he, "that is an all-sufficient justification. With his fortune and his name, he is in a position to choose his wife from among all the heiresses of France. Why should he address his attentions in particular to the woman you love? Ah! if he were poor—if his fortune were impared—if he felt the need of re-gilding his escutcheon, like my son-in-law—"

He paused; there was a rap at the door. The baron called out: "Come in," and a valet appeared, and informed his master that the Marquis de Valorsay wished to speak with him.

It was the enemy! Pascal's features were distorted with rage; but he did not stir—he did not utter a word. "Ask the marquis into the next room," said the baron. "I will join him there at once." Then as the servant retired, the baron turned to Pascal and said: "Well, M. Feraillleur, do you divine my intentions?"

"I think so, monsieur. You probably intend me to hear the conversation you are going to have with M. de Valorsay."

"Exactly. I shall leave the door open, and you can listen."

This word, "listen," was uttered without bitterness, or even reproach; and yet Pascal could not help blushing and hanging his head. "I wish to prove to you, that your suspicions are without foundation," pursued the baron. "Rest assured that I shall prove this conclusively. I will conduct

the conversation in the form of a cross-examination, and after the marquis's departure, you will be obliged to confess that you were wrong."

"Or you, that I am right?"

"So be it. Any one is liable to be mistaken, and I am not obstinate."

He was about to leave the room, when Pascal detained him. "I scarcely know how to testify my gratitude even now, monsieur, and yet—if I dared—if I did not fear to abuse your kindness, I should ask one more favour."

"Speak, Monsieur Ferailleur."

"It is this, I do not know the Marquis de Valorsay; and if, instead of leaving the door wide open, you would partially close it, I should hear as distinctly, and I could also see him."

"Agreed," replied the baron. And, opening the door, he passed into the dining-room, with his right hand cordially extended, and saying, in his most genial tones, "Excuse me, my dear friend, for keeping you waiting. I received your letter this morning, and I was expecting you, but some unexpected business required my attention just now. Are you quite well?"

As the baron entered the room, the marquis had stepped quickly forward to meet him. Either he was inspired with fresh hope, or else he had wonderful powers of self-control, for never had he looked more calm—never had his face evinced haughtier indifference, more complete satisfaction with himself, and greater contempt for others. He was dressed with even more than usual care, and in perfect taste as well; moreover, his valet had surpassed himself in dressing his hair—for one would have sworn that his locks were still luxuriant. If he experienced any secret anxiety, it only showed itself in a slightly increased stiffness of his right leg—the limb broken in hunting. "I ought rather to inquire concerning your own health," he remarked. "You seem greatly disturbed; your cravat is untied." And, pointing to the broken china scattered about the floor, he added: "On seeing this, I asked myself if an accident had not happened."

"The baroness was taken suddenly ill at the breakfast-table. Her fainting fit startled me a little. But it was a mere trifle. She has quite recovered already, and you may rely upon her applauding your victory at Vincennes to-day. She has I don't know how many hundred louis staked upon your horses."

The marquis's countenance assumed an expression of cordial regret. "I am very sorry, upon my word!" he exclaimed. "But I sha'n't take part in the races at Vincennes. I have withdrawn my horses. And, in future, I shall have nothing to do with racing."

"Nonsense!"

"It is the truth, however. I have been led to this determination by the infamous slander which has been circulated respecting me."

This answer was a mere trifle, but it somewhat shook Baron Trigault's confidence. "You have been slandered!" he muttered.

"Abominably. Last Sunday the best horse in my stables, Domingo, came in third. He was the favourite in the ring. You can understand the rest. I have been accused of manœuvring to have my own horse beaten. People have declared that it was my interest he should be beaten, and that I had an understanding with my jockey to that effect. This is an every-day occurrence, I know very well; but, as regards myself, it is none the less an infamous lie!"

"Who has dared to circulate such a report?"

"Oh, how can I tell? It is a fact, however, that the story has been circulated everywhere, but in such a cautious manner that there is no way

of calling the authors to account. They have even gone so far as to say that this piece of knavery brought me in an enormous sum, and that I used Rochecotte's, Kervaulieu's, and Coralth's names in betting against my own horse."

The baron's agitation was so great that M. de Valorsay observed it, though he did not understand the cause. Living in the same society with the Baroness Trigault, and knowing her story, he thought that Coralth's name might, perhaps, have irritated the baron. "And so," he quickly continued, "don't be surprised if, during the coming week, you see the sale of my horses announced."

"What! you are going to sell—"

"All my horses—yes, baron. I have nineteen; and it will be very strange if I don't get eight or ten thousand louis for the lot. Domingo alone is worth more than forty thousand francs."

To talk of selling—of realizing something you possess—rings ominously in people's ears. The person who talks of selling proclaims his need of money—and often his approaching ruin. "It will save you at least a hundred and fifty or sixty thousand francs a year," observed the baron.

"Double it and you won't come up to the mark. Ah! my dear baron, you have yet to learn that there is nothing so ruinous as a racing stable. It's worse than gambling; and women, in comparison, are a real economy. Ninette costs me less than Domingo, with his jockey, his trainer, and his grooms. My manager declares that the twenty-three thousand francs I won last year, cost me at least fifty thousand."

Was he boasting, or was he speaking the truth? The baron was engaged in a rapid calculation. "What does Valorsay spend a year?" he was saying to himself. "Let us say two hundred and fifty thousand francs for his stable; forty thousand francs for Ninette Simplon; eighty thousand for his household expenses, and at least thirty thousand for personal matters, travelling, and play. All this amounts to something like four hundred and thirty thousand francs a year. Does his income equal that sum? Certainly not. Then he must have been living on the principal—he is ruined."

Meanwhile the marquis gaily continued: "You see I'm going to make a change in my mode of life. Ah! it surprises you! But one must make an end of it, sooner or later. I begin to find a bachelor life not so very pleasant after all; there is rheumatism in prospect, and my digestion is becoming impaired—in short, I feel that it is time for marriage, baron; and—I am about to marry."

"You!"

"Yes, I. What, haven't you heard of it, yet? It has been talked of at the club for three days or more."

"No, this is the first intimation I have received of it. It is true, however, that I have not been to the club for three days. I have made a wager with Kami-Bey, you know—that rich Turk—and as our sittings are eight or ten hours long, we play in his apartments at the Grand Hôtel. And so you are to be married," the baron continued, after a slight pause. "Ah, well! I know one person who won't be pleased."

"Who, pray?"

"Ninette Simplon."

M. de Valorsay laughed heartily. "As if that would make any difference to me!" he exclaimed. And then in a most confidential manner he resumed: "She will soon be consoled. Ninette Simplon is a shrewd girl

—a girl whom I have always suspected of having an account book in place of a heart. I know she has at least three hundred thousand francs safely invested; her furniture and diamonds are worth as much more. Why should she regret me? Add to this that I have promised her fifty thousand francs to dry her tears with on my wedding-day, and you will understand that she really longs to see me married."

"I understand," replied the baron; "Ninette Simplon won't trouble you. But I can't understand why you should talk of economy on the eve of a marriage which will no doubt double your fortune; for I'm sure you won't surrender your liberty without good and substantial reasons."

"You are mistaken."

"How mistaken?"

"Well, I won't hesitate to confess to you, my dear baron, that the girl I am about to marry hasn't a penny of her own. My future wife has no dowry save her black eyes—but they are certainly superb ones."

This assertion seemed to disprove Pascal's statements. "Can it really be you who are talking in this strain?" cried the baron. "You, a practical worldly man, give way to such a burst of sentiment?"

"Well, yes."

The baron opened his eyes in astonishment. "Ah! then you adore your future bride!"

"Adore only feebly expresses my feelings."

"I must be dreaming."

Valorsay shrugged his shoulders with the air of a man who has made up his mind to accept the banter of his friends; and in a tone of mingled sentimentality and irony, he said: "I know that it's absurd, and that I shall be the laughing stock of my acquaintances. Still it doesn't matter; I have never been coward enough to hide my feelings. I'm in love, my dear baron, as madly in love as a young collegian—sufficiently in love to watch my lady's house at night even when I have no possible hope of seeing her. I thought myself *blasé*, I boasted of being invulnerable. Well, one fine morning, I woke up with the heart of a youth of twenty beating in my breast—a heart which trembled at the slightest glance from the girl I love, and sent purple flushes to my face. Naturally I tried to reason with myself. I was ashamed of my weakness; but the more clearly I showed myself my folly, the more obstinate my heart became. And perhaps my folly is not such a great one after all. Such perfect beauty united with such modesty, grace, and nobility of soul, such passion, candour, and talent, cannot be met twice in a lifetime. I intend to leave Paris. We shall first of all go to Italy, my wife and I. After a while we shall return and install ourselves at Valorsay, like two turtle-doves. Upon my word, my imagination paints a charming picture of the calm and happy life we shall lead there! I don't deserve such good fortune. I must have been born under a lucky star!"

Had he been less engrossed in his narrative, he would have heard the sound of a stifled oath in the adjoining room; and had he been less absorbed in the part he was playing, he would have observed a cloud on his companion's brow. The baron was a keen observer, and he had detected a false ring in this apparently vehement outburst of passion. "I understand it now, my dear marquis," said he; "you have met the descendant of some illustrious but impoverished family."

"You are wrong. My future bride has no other name than her Christian name of Marguerite."

"It is a regular romance then!"

"You are quite right; it is a romance. Were you acquainted with the Count de Chalusse, who died a few days ago?"

"No; but I have often heard him spoken of."

"Well, it is his daughter whom I am about to marry—his illegitimate daughter."

The baron started. "Excuse me," said he; "M. de Chalusse was immensly rich, and he was a bachelor. How does it happen then that his daughter, even though she be his illegitimate child, should find herself penniless?"

"A mere chance—a fatality. M. de Chalusse died very suddenly; he had no time to make a will or to acknowledge his daughter."

"But why had he not taken some precautions?"

"A formal recognition of his daughter was attended by too many difficulties, and even dangers. Mademoiselle Marguerite had been abandoned by her mother when only five or six months old; it is only a few years since M. de Chalusse, after a thousand vain attempts, at last succeeded in finding her."

It was no longer on Pascal's account, but on his own, that Baron Trigault listened with breathless attention. "How very strange," he exclaimed, in default of something better to say. "How very strange!"

"Isn't it? It is as good as a novel."

"Would it be—indiscreet—"

"To inquire? Certainly not. The count told me the whole story, without entering into particulars—you understand. When he was quite young, M. de Chalusse became enamoured of a charming young lady, whose husband had gone to tempt fortune in America. Being an honest woman, she resisted the count's advances for awhile—a very little while; but in less than a year after her husband's departure, she gave birth to a pretty little daughter, Mademoiselle Marguerite. But then why had the husband gone to America?"

"Yes," faltered the baron; "why—why, indeed?"

"Everything was progressing finely, when M. de Chalusse, was in his turn obliged to start for Germany, having been informed that a sister of his, who had fled from the paternal roof with nobody knows who, had been seen there. He had been absent some four months or so, when one morning the post brought him a letter from his pretty mistress, who wrote: 'We are lost! My husband is at Marseilles: he will be here to-morrow. Never attempt to see me again. Fear everything from him. Farewell.' On receiving this letter, M. de Chalusse flung himself into a post chaise, and returned to Paris. He was determined, absolutely determined, to have his daughter. But he arrived too late. On hearing of her husband's return, the young wife had lost her head. She had but one thought—to conceal her fault, at any cost; and one night, being completely disguised, she left her child on a doorstep in the vicinity of the central markets—"

The marquis suddenly paused in his story to exclaim, "Why, what is the matter with you, my dear baron? What is the matter? Are you ill? Shall I ring?"

The baron was as pale as if the last drop of blood had been drawn from his veins, and there were dark purple circles about his eyes. Still, on being questioned, he managed to answer in a choked voice, but not without a terrible effort: "Nothing! It is nothing. A mere trifle! It will be over in a moment. It *is* over!" Still his limbs trembled so much that he

could not stand, and he sank on to a chair, murmuring: "I entreat you, marquis—continue. It is very interesting—very interesting indeed."

M. de Valorsay resumed his narrative. "The husband was incontestably an artless fellow; but he was also, it appears, a man of remarkable energy and determination. Having somehow ascertained that his wife had given birth to a child in his absence, he moved heaven and earth not only to discover the child, but its father also. He had sworn to kill them both; and he was a man to keep his vow unmoved by a thought of the guillotine. And if you require a proof of his strength of character, here it is. He said nothing to his wife on the subject, he did not utter a single reproach; he treated her exactly as he had done before his absence. But he watched her, or employed others to watch her, both day and night, convinced that she would finally commit some act of imprudence which would give him the clue he wanted. Fortunately, she was very shrewd. She soon discovered that her husband knew everything, and she warned M. de Chalusse, thus saving his life."

It is not at all remarkable that the Marquis de Valorsay should have failed to see any connection between his narrative and the baron's agitation. What possible connection could there be between opulent Baron Trigault and the poor devil who went to seek his fortune in America? What imaginable connection could there be between the confirmed gambler, who was Kami-Bey's companion, Lia d'Argelès' friend, and the husband who for ten long years had pursued the man who, by seducing his wife, had robbed him of all the happiness of life? Another point that would have dispelled any suspicions on the marquis's part was that he had found the baron greatly agitated on arriving, and that he now seemed to be gradually regaining his composure. So he continued his story in his customary light, mocking tone. It is the perfection of good taste and high breeding—"proper form," indeed, not to be astonished or moved by anything, in fact to sneer at everything, and hold one's self quite above the emotions which disturb the minds of plebeians.

Thus the marquis continued: "I am necessarily compelled to omit many particulars, my dear baron. The count was not very explicit when he reached this part of his story; but, in spite of his reticence, I learned that he had been tricked in his turn, that certain papers had been stolen from him, and that he had been defrauded in many ways by his *inamorata*. I also know that M. de Chalusse's whole life was haunted by the thought of the husband he had wronged. He felt a presentiment that he would die by this man's hand. He saw danger on every side. If he went out alone in the evening, which was an exceedingly rare occurrence, he turned the street corners with infinite caution; it seemed to him that he could always see the gleam of a poniard or a pistol in the shade. I should never have believed in this constant terror on the part of a really brave man, if he had not confessed it to me with his own lips. Ten or twelve years passed before he dared to make the slightest attempt to find his daughter, so much did he fear to arouse his enemy's attention. It was not until he had discovered that the husband had become discouraged and had discontinued his search, that the count began his. It was a long and arduous one, but at last it succeeded, thanks to the assistance of a clever scoundrel named Fortunat."

The baron with difficulty repressed a movement of eager curiosity, and remarked. "What a peculiar name!"

"And his first name is Isidore. Ah! he's a smooth-tongued scoundrel, a

rascal of the most dangerous kind, who richly deserves to be in jail. How it is that he is allowed to prosecute his dishonourable calling I can't understand; but it is none the less true that he does follow it, and without the slightest attempt at concealment, at an office he has on the Place de la Bourse."

This name and address were engraved upon the baron's memory, never to be effaced.

"However," resumed M. de Valorsay, "the poor count was fated to have no peace. The husband had scarcely ceased to torment him, he had scarcely begun to breathe freely, when the wife attacked him in her turn. She must have been one of those vile and despicable women who make a man hate the entire sex. Pretending that the count had turned her from the path of duty, and destroyed her life and happiness, she lost no opportunity of tormenting him. She would not allow M. de Chalusse to keep the child with him, nor would she consent to his adopting the girl. She declared it an act of imprudence, which would surely set her husband upon the track, sooner or later. And when the count announced his intention of legally adopting the child, in spite of her protests, she declared that, rather than allow it, she would confess everything to her husband."

"The count was a patient man," sneered the baron.

"Not so patient as you may suppose. His submission was due to some secret cause which he never confided to me. There must have been some great crime under all this. In any case, the poor count found it impossible to escape this terrible woman. He took refuge at Cannes; but she followed him. He travelled through Italy, for I don't know how many months under an assumed name, but all in vain. He was at last compelled to conceal his daughter in some provincial convent. During the last few months of his life he obtained peace—that is to say, he bought it. This lady's husband must either be very poor or exceedingly stingy; and as she was exceedingly fond of luxury, M. de Chalusse effected a compromise by giving her a large sum monthly, and also by paying her dressmaker's bills."

The baron sprang to his feet with a passionate exclamation. "The vile wretch!" he said.

But he quickly reseated himself, and the exclamation astonished M. de Valorsay so little that he quietly concluded by saying: "And this is the reason, baron, why my beloved Marguerite, the future Marquise de Valorsay, has no dowry."

The baron cast a look of positive anguish at the door of the smoking-room. He had heard a slight movement there; and he trembled with fear lest Pascal, maddened with anger and jealousy, should rush in and throw himself upon the marquis. Plainly enough, this perilous situation could not last much longer. The baron's own powers of self-control and dissimulation were almost exhausted, and so postponing until another time the many questions he still wished to ask M. de Valorsay, he made haste to check these confidential disclosures. "Upon my word," he exclaimed, with a forced laugh, "I was expecting something quite different. This affair begins like a genuine romance, and ends, as everything ends now-a-days, in money!"

IV.

As a millionaire and a gambler, Baron Trigault enjoyed all sorts of privileges. He assumed the right to be brutal, ill-bred, cynical and bold; to be one of those persons who declare that folks must take them as they find them. But his rudeness now was so thoroughly offensive that under any other circumstances the marquis would have resented it. However, he had special reasons for preserving his temper, so he decided to laugh.

"Yes, these stories always end in the same way, baron," said he. "You haven't touched a card this morning, and I know your hands are itching. Excuse me for making you waste precious time, as you say; but what you have just heard was only a necessary preface."

"Only a preface?"

"Yes; but don't be discouraged. I have arrived at the object of my visit now."

As Baron Trigault was supposed to enjoy an income of at least eight hundred thousand francs a year, he received in the course of a twelvemonth at least a million applications for money or help, and for this reason he had not an equal for detecting a coming appeal. "Good heavens!" he thought, "Valorsay is going to ask me for money." In fact he felt certain that the marquis's pretended carelessness concealed real embarrassment, and that it was difficult for him to find the words he wanted.

"So I am about to marry," M. de Valorsay resumed—"I wish to break off my former life, to turn over a new leaf. And now the wedding gifts, the two *fêtes* that I propose giving, the repairs at Valorsay, and the honeymoon with my wife—all these things will cost a nice little sum."

"A nice little sum, indeed!"

"Ah, well! as I'm not going to wed an heiress, I fear I shall run a trifle short. The matter was worrying me a little, when I thought of you. I said to myself: 'The baron, who always has money at his disposal, will no doubt let me have the use of five thousand louis for a year.'"

The baron's eyes were fixed upon his companion's face. "Zounds!" he exclaimed in a half-grieved, half-petulant tone: "I haven't the amount!"

It was not disappointment that showed itself on the marquis's face; it was absolute despair, quickly concealed.

But the baron had detected it; and he realised his applicant's urgent need. He felt certain that M. de Valorsay was financially ruined—and yet, as it did not suit his plans to refuse, he hastily added: "When I say I haven't that amount, I mean that I haven't got it on hand just at this moment. But I shall have it within forty-eight hours; and if you are at home at this time on the day after to-morrow, I will send you one of my agents, who will arrange the matter with you."

A moment before, the marquis had allowed his consternation to show itself; but this time he knew how to conceal the joy that filled his soul. So it was in the most indifferent manner, as if the affair were one of trivial importance, that he thanked the baron for being so obliging. Plainly enough, he now longed to make his escape, and indeed, after rattling off a few commonplace remarks, he rose to his feet and took his leave, exclaiming: "Till the day after to-morrow, then!"

The baron sank into an arm-chair completely overcome. A martyr to a

passion that was stronger than reason itself, the victim of a fatal love which he had not been able to drive from his heart, Baron Trigault had passed many terrible hours, but never had he been so completely crushed as at this moment when chance revealed the secret which he had vainly pursued for years. The old wounds in his heart opened afresh, and his sufferings were poignant beyond description. All his efforts to save this woman whom he at once loved and hated from the depths of degradation, had proved unavailing. "And she has extorted money from the Count de Chalusse," he thought; "she sold him the right to adopt their own daughter." And so strange are the workings of the human heart, that this circumstance, trivial in comparison with many others, drove the unfortunate baron almost frantic with rage. What did it avail him that he had become one of the richest men in Paris? He allowed his wife eight thousand francs a month, almost one hundred thousand francs a year, merely for her dresses and fancies. Not a quarter-day passed, but what he paid her debts to a large amount, and in spite of all this, she had sunk so low as to extort money from a man who had once loved her. "What can she do with it all?" muttered the baron, overcome with sorrow and indignation. "How can she succeed in spending the income of several millions?"

A name, the name of Ferdinand de Coralth, rose to his lips; but he did not pronounce it. He saw Pascal emerging from the smoking-room; and though he had forgotten the young advocate's very existence, his appearance now restored him to a consciousness of reality. "Ah, well! M. Ferailleur?" he said, like a man suddenly aroused from some terrible nightmare. Pascal tried to make some reply, but he was unable to do so—such a flood of incoherent thoughts was seething and foaming in his brain. "Did you hear, M. de Valorsay?" continued the baron. "Now we know, beyond the possibility of doubt, who Mademoiselle Marguerite's mother is. What is to be done? What would you do in my place?"

"Ah, monsieur! how can I tell?"

"Wouldn't your first thought be of vengeance! It is mine. But upon whom can I wreak my vengeance? Upon the Count de Chalusse? He is dead. Upon my wife? Yes, I might do so; but I lack the courage—Mademoiselle Marguerite remains."

"But she is innocent, monsieur; she has never wronged you."

The baron did not seem to hear this exclamation. "And to make Mademoiselle Marguerite's life one long misery," said he, "I need only favour her marriage with the marquis. Ah, he would make her cruelly expiate the crime of her birth."

"But you won't do so!" cried Pascal, in a transport, "it would be shameful; I won't allow it. Never, I swear before high Heaven! never, while I live, shall Valorsay marry Marguerite. He may perhaps vanquish me in the coming struggle; he may lead her to the threshold of the church, but there he will find me—armed—and I will have justice—human justice in default of legal satisfaction. And, afterwards, the law may take its course!"

The baron looked at him with deep emotion. "Ah, you know what it is to love!" he exclaimed; and in a hollow voice, he added: "and thus it was that I loved Marguerite's mother."

The breakfast table had not been cleared, and a large decanter of water was still standing on it. The baron poured out two large glasses, which he drained with feverish avidity, and then he began to walk aimlessly about the room.

Pascal held his peace. It seemed to him that his own destiny was being decided in this man's mind, that his whole future depended upon the determination he arrived at. A prisoner awaiting the verdict of the jury could not have suffered more intense anxiety. At last, when a minute, which seemed a century, had elapsed, the baron paused. "Now as before, M. Ferailleur," he said, roughly, "I'm for you and with you. Give me your hand—that's right. Honest people ought to protect and assist one another when scoundrels assail them. We will reinstate you in public esteem, monsieur. We will unmask Coralth, and we will crush Valorsay if we find that he is really the instigator of the infamous plot that ruined you."

"What, monsieur! Can you doubt it after your conversation with him?"

The baron shook his head. "I've no doubt but what Valorsay is ruined financially," said he. "I am certain that my hundred thousand francs will be lost forever if I lend them to him. I would be willing to swear that he bet against his own horse and prevented the animal from winning, as he is accused of doing."

"You must see, then—"

"Excuse me—all this does *not* explain the great discrepancy between your allegations and his story. You assure me that he cares nothing whatever for Mademoiselle Marguerite; he pretends that he adores her."

"Yes, monsieur, yes—the scoundrel dared to say so. Ah! if I had not been deterred by a fear of losing my revenge!"

"I understand; but allow me to conclude. According to you, Mademoiselle Marguerite possesses several millions. According to him, she hasn't a penny of her own. Which is right? I believe he is. His desire to borrow a hundred thousand francs of me proves it; and, besides, he wouldn't have come this morning to tell me a falsehood, which would be discovered to-morrow. Still, if he is telling the truth, it is impossible to explain the foul conspiracy you have suffered by."

This objection had previously presented itself to Pascal's mind, and he had found an explanation which seemed to him a plausible one. "M. de Chalusse was not dead," said he, "when M. de Coralth and M. de Valorsay decided on this plan of ridding themselves of me. Consequently, Mademoiselle Marguerite was still an heiress."

"That's true; but the very day after the commission of the crime, the accomplices must have discovered that it could do them no good; so, why have they still persisted in their scheme?"

Pascal tried to find a satisfactory answer, but failed.

"There must be some iniquitous mystery in this affair, which neither you nor I suspect," remarked the baron.

"That is exactly what my mother told me."

"Ah! that's Madame Ferailleur's opinion? Then it is a good one. Come, let us reason a little. Mademoiselle Marguerite loved you, you say?"

"Yes."

"And she has suddenly broken off the engagement?"

"She wrote to me that the Count de Chalusse extorted from her a promise on his death bed, that she would marry the Marquis de Valorsay."

The baron sprang to his feet. "Stop," he cried—"stop! We now have a clue to the truth perhaps. Ah! so Mademoiselle Marguerite has written to you that M. de Chalusse commanded her to marry the marquis! Then the count must have been fully restored to consciousness before he

breathed his last. On the other hand, Valorsay pretends that Mademoiselle Marguerite is left without resources, simply because the count died too suddenly to be able to write or to sign a couple of lines. Can you reconcile these two versions of the affair, M. Ferailleur? Certainly not. Then which version is false? We must ascertain that point. When shall you see Mademoiselle Marguerite again?"

"She has requested me *never* to try to see her again."

"Very well! She must be disobeyed. You must discover some way of seeing her without anyone's knowledge. She is undoubtedly watched, so don't write on any account." He reflected for a moment, and then added: "We shall, perhaps, become morally certain of Valorsay's and Coralth's guilt, but there's a wide difference between this and the establishment of their guilt by material proofs. Two scoundrels who league to ruin an honest man don't sign a contract to that effect before a notary. Proofs! Ah! where shall we find them? We must gain an intimate knowledge of Valorsay's private life. The best plan would be to find some man devoted to our interests who would watch him, and insinuate himself into his confidence."

Pascal interrupted the baron with an eager gesture. Hope glittered in his eyes. "Yes!" he exclaimed, "yes; it is necessary that M. de Valorsay should be watched by a man of quick perception—a man clever enough to make himself useful to the marquis, and capable of rendering him an important service in case of need. I will be the man, monsieur, if you will allow me. The thought occurred to me just now while I was listening to you. You promised to send some one to Valorsay's house with money. I entreat you to allow me to take the place of the man you intended to send. The marquis doesn't know me, and I am sufficiently sure of myself to promise you that I will not betray my identity. I will present myself as your agent; he will give me his confidence. I shall take him money or fair promises, I shall be well received, and I have a plan—"

He was interrupted by a rap at the door. The next moment a footman entered, and informed his master that a messenger wished to speak to him on urgent business. "Let him come in," said the baron.

It was Job, Madame Lia d'Argelès' confidential servant, who entered the room. He bowed respectfully, and, with an air of profound mystery exclaimed: "I have been looking for the baron everywhere. I was ordered by madame not to return without him."

"Very well," said M. Trigault. "I will go with you at once."

V.

How was it that a clever man like M. Fortunat made such a blunder as to choose a Sunday, and a racing Sunday too, to call on M. Wilkie. His anxiety might explain the mistake, but it did not justify it. He felt certain, that under any other circumstances he would not have been dismissed so cavalierly. He would at least have been allowed to develop his proposals and then who knows what might have happened.

But the races had interfered with his plans. M. Wilkie had been compelled to attend to Pompier de Nanterre, that famous steeple-chaser, of which he owned one third part, and he had moreover to give orders to the jockey, whose lord and master he was to an equal extent. These were sacred duties, since Wilkie's share in a race-horse constituted his only claim

to a footing in fashionable society. But it was a strong claim—a claim that justified the display of whips and spurs that decorated his apartments in the Rue du Helder, and allowed him to aspire to the character of a sporting-man. Wilkie really imagined that folks were waiting for him at Vincennes; and that the *fête* would not be complete without his presence.

Still, when he presented himself inside the enclosure, a cigar in his mouth, and his racing card dangling from his button-hole, he was obliged to confess that his entrance did not create much of a sensation. An astonishing bit of news had imparted unusual excitement to the ring. People were eagerly discussing the Marquis de Valorsay's sudden determination to pay forfeit and withdraw his horses from the contest; and the best informed declared that in the betting-rooms the evening before, he had openly announced his intention of selling his racing stable. If the marquis had hoped that by adopting this course he would silence the suspicions which had been aroused, he was doomed to grievous disappointment. The rumour that he had secretly bet against his own horse, Domingo, on the previous Sunday, and that he had given orders not to let the animal win the race, was steadily gaining credence.

Large sums had been staked on Domingo's success. He had been the favourite in the betting ring and the losers were by no means pleased. Some declared that they had seen the jockey hold Domingo back; and they insisted that it was necessary to make an example, and disqualify both the marquis and his jockey. Still one weighty circumstance pleaded in M. de Valorsay's favour—his fortune, or, at least, the fortune he was supposed to possess. "Why should such a rich man stoop to cheat?" asked his defenders. "To put money into one's pocket in this way is even worse than to cheat at cards! Besides it's impossible! Valorsay is above such contemptible charges. He is a perfect gentleman."

"Perhaps so," replied the sceptical bystanders. "But people said exactly the same of Croisenois, of the Duc de H., and Baron P., who were finally convicted of the same rascality that Valorsay is accused of."

"It's an infamous slander! If he had been inclined to cheat, he could have easily diverted suspicion. He would have let Domingo come in second, not third!"

"If he were not guilty, and afraid of detection, he wouldn't pay forfeit to-day nor sell his horses."

"He only retires from the turf because he's going to marry—"

"Nonsense! That's no reason whatever."

Like all gamblers, the frequenters of the turf are distrustful and inclined to be quarrelsome. No one is above their suspicions when they lose nor above their wrath when they are duped. And this Domingo affair united all the losers against Valorsay; they formed a little battalion of enemies who were no doubt powerless for the time being, but who were ready to take a startling revenge whenever a good opportunity presented itself. Naturally enough M. Wilkie sided with the marquis, whom he had heard his friend, M. de Coralth, speak of on several occasions. "Accuse the dear marquis!" he exclaimed. "It's contemptible, outrageous. Why only last evening he said to me, 'My good friend, Domingo's defeat cost me two thousand louis!'" M. de Valorsay had said nothing of the kind, for the very good reason that he did not even know Wilkie by sight; still no one paid much heed to the assertion, whereat Wilkie felt vexed, and resolved to turn his attention to his jockey.

The latter was a lazy worthless fellow, who had been dismissed from

every stable he had previously served in, and who swindled and robbed the young gentlemen who employed him without either limit or shame. Although he made them pay him a very high salary—something like eight thousand francs a year—on the plea that it was most repugnant to his feelings to act as a groom, trainer, and jockey at the same time, he regularly every month presented them with fabulous bills from the grain merchant, the veterinary surgeon, and the harness-maker. In addition he regularly sold Pompier's oats in order to obtain liquor, and in fact the poor animal was so nearly starved that he could scarcely stand on his legs. The jockey ascribed the horse's extreme thinness to a system of rigorous training ; and the owners did not question the statement in the least. He had made them believe, and they in turn had made many others believe, that Pompier de Nanterre would certainly win such and such a race ; and, trusting in this fallacious promise, they risked their money on the poor animal—and lost it.

In point of fact this jockey would have been the happiest mortal in the world if such things as steeple-chases had never existed. In the first place he judged, with no little reason, that it was dangerous to leap hurdles on such an animal as Pompier; and, secondly, nothing irritated him so much as to be obliged to promenade with his three employers in turn. But how could he refuse, since he knew that if these young men hired him, it was chiefly, or only in view of, displaying themselves in his company. It afforded them untold satisfaction to walk to and fro along the course in front of the grand stand, with their jockey in his orange jacket with green sleeves. They were firmly convinced that he reflected enormous credit upon them, and their hearts swelled with joy at the thought of the envy they no doubt inspired. This conviction gave rise indeed to terrible quarrels, in which each of the three owners was wont to accuse the others of monopolizing the jockey.

On this occasion, M. Wilkie—being fortunate enough to arrive the first —immediately repaired to Pompier de Nanterre's stall. Never had circumstances been more favourable for a display of the animal's speed. The day was magnificent ; the stands were crowded, and thousands of eager spectators were pushing and jostling one another beyond the ropes which limited the course. M. Wilkie seemed to be everywhere ; he showed himself in a dozen different places at once, always followed by his jockey, whom he ordered about in a loud voice, with many excited gesticulations. And how great his delight was when, as he passed through the crowd, he heard people exclaim, "That gentleman has a racing stable. His horses are going to compete !" What bliss thrilled his heart when he overheard the admiring exclamation of some worthy shopkeeper who was greatly impressed by the gay silk jacket and the top-boots !

But, unfortunately, this happiness could not last forever. His partners arrived, and claimed the jockey in their turn. So M. Wilkie left the course and strolled about among the carriages, until at last he found an equipage which was occupied by the young ladies who had accepted his invitation to supper the evening before, and who were now making a profuse display of the very yellowest hair they possessed. This afforded him another opportunity of attracting public attention, and to giving proofs of his "form," for he had not filled the box of his carriage with champagne for nothing. At last the decisive moment came, and he made himself conspicuous by shouting. "Now! Now! Here he is! Look! Bravo, Pompier! One hundred on Pompier !"

But, alas ! poor Pompier de Nanterre fell exhausted before half the dis-

tance was accomplished; and that evening Wilkie described his defeat, with a profusion of technical terms that inspired the uninitiated with the deepest awe. "What a disaster, my friends," he exclaimed. "Pompier de Nanterre, an incomparable steeple-chaser, to break down in such a fashion! And beaten by whom? By Mustapha, an outsider, without any record whatever! The ring was intensely excited—and I was simply crazed!"

However, his defeat did not affect him very deeply. It was forgotten at thought of the inheritance which his friend Coralth had spoken to him about. And to-morrow M. de Coralth would tell him the secret. He had only twenty hours longer to wait! "To-morrow! to-morrow!" he said to himself again and again, with a thrill of mingled joy and impatience. And what bright visions of future glory haunted him! He saw himself the possessor of a magnificent stud, of sufficient wealth to gratify every fancy; he would splash mud upon all the passers-by, and especially upon his former acquaintances, as he dashed past them in his superb equipage; the best tailor should invent astonishing garments for him; he would make himself conspicuous at all the first performances in a stage-box, with the most notorious women in Paris; his *fêtes* would be described in the papers; he would be the continual subject of comment; he would be credited with splendid, perfect "form."

It is true that M. de Coralth had promised him all this, without a word of explanation; but what did that matter? Should he doubt his friend's word? Never! The viscount was not merely his model but his oracle as well. By the way in which he spoke of him, it might have been supposed that they had been friends from their childhood, or, at least, that they had had known each other for years. Such was not the case, however. Their acquaintance dated only seven or eight months back, and their first meeting had apparently been the result of chance; though it is needless to say, perhaps, that this chance had been carefully prepared by M. de Coralth. Having discovered Madame Lia d'Argelès' secret, the viscount watched Wilkie, ascertained where he spent his evenings, contrived a way of introducing himself into his society, and on their third meeting was skilful enough to render him a service—in other words, to lend him some money. From that moment the conquest was assured; for M. de Coralth possessed in an eminent degree all the attributes that were likely to dazzle and charm the gifted owner of Pompier de Nanterre. First of all there was his title, then his impudent assurance and his apparent wealth, and last, but by no means least, his numerous and fashionable acquaintances. He was not long in discovering his advantage, and in profiting by it. And without giving M. Wilkie an inkling of the truth, he succeeded in obtaining from him as accurate a knowledge of his past career as the young fellow himself possessed.

M. Wilkie did not know much concerning his origin or his early life; and his history, so far as he was acquainted with it, could be told in a few words. His earliest recollection was of the ocean. He was sure, perfectly sure, that he had made a very long sea-voyage when only a little child, and he looked upon America as his birth-place. The French language was certainly not the first he had learned, for he still remembered a limited number of English phrases. The English word "father" was among those that lingered in his memory; and now, after a lapse of twenty years, he pronounced it without the least foreign accent. But while he remembered the word perfectly well, no recollection remained to him of the person he had

called by that name. His first sensations were those of hunger, weariness, and cold. He recollected, and very distinctly too, how on one long winter night, a woman had dragged him after her through the streets of Paris, in an icy rain. He could still see himself as he wandered on, crying with weariness, and begging for something to eat. And then the poor woman who held him by the hand lifted him in her arms and carried him on—on, until her own strength failed, and she was obliged to set him on the ground again. A vague portrait of this woman, who was most probably his mother, still lingered in his memory. According to his description, she was extremely handsome, tall, and very fair. He had been particularly impressed with the pale tint and profusion of her beautiful hair.

Their poverty had not lasted long. He remembered being installed with his mother in a very handsome suite of rooms. A man who was still young, and whom he called "Monsieur Jacques," came every day, and brought him sweatmeats and playthings. He thought he must have been about four years old at that time. However, he had enjoyed this comfortable state of things scarcely a month, when one morning a stranger presented himself. The visitor held a long conference with his mother, or, at least, with the person whom he called by that name. He did not understand what they were talking about, but he was none the less very uneasy. The result of the interview must have justified his instinctive fear, for his mother took him on her lap, and embraced him with convulsive tenderness. She sobbed violently, and repeated again and again in a faltering voice: "Poor child! my beloved Wilkie! I shall never kiss you again—never never! Alas! It must be so! Give me courage, my God!"

Those were the exact words; Wilkie was sure on that point. It seemed to him he could still hear that despairing farewell. For it was indeed a farewell. The stranger took him in his arms and carried him away, in spite of his cries and struggles to escape. This person to whose care he was confided was the master of a small boarding-school, and his wife was the kindest and most patient of women. However, this did not prevent Wilkie from crying and begging for his mother at first; but gradually he forgot her. He was not unhappy, for he was petted and indulged more than any of the other pupils, and he spent most of his time playing on the terrace or wandering about the garden. But this charming life could not last for ever. According to his calculation, he was just ten years old, when one Sunday, towards the end of October, a grave-looking, red-whiskered gentleman, clad in solemn black with a white necktie, presented himself at the school, and declared that he had been instructed by Wilkie's relatives to place him in a college to continue his education.

Young Wilkie's lamentations were long and loud; but they did not prevent M. Patterson—for that was the gentleman's name—from taking him to the college of Louis-the-Great, where he was entered as a boarder. As he did not study, and as he was only endowed with a small amount of intelligence, he learned scarcely anything during the years he remained there. Every Sunday and every *fête* day, M. Patterson made his appearance at ten o'clock precisely, took Wilkie for a walk in Paris or the environs, gave him his breakfast and dinner at some of the best restaurants, bought everything he expressed a desire to have, and at nine o'clock precisely took him back to the college again. During the holidays M. Patterson kept the boy with him, refusing him nothing in the way of pleasure, granting all his wishes, but never losing sight of him for a moment. And if Wilkie complained of this constant watchfulness, M. Patterson always

replied, "I must obey orders;" and this answer invariably put an end to the discussion.

So things went on until it became time for Wilkie to take his degree. He presented himself for examination; and, of course, he failed. Fortunately, however, M. Patterson was not at a loss for an expedient. He placed his charge in a private school; and the following year, at a cost of five thousand francs, he beguiled a poor devil into running the risk of three years' imprisonment, by assuming M. Wilkie's name, and passing the examination in his place. In possession of the precious diploma which opens the door of every career, M. Wilkie now hoped that his pockets would be filled, and that he would then be set at liberty. But the hope was vain! M. Patterson placed him in the hands of an old tutor who had been engaged to travel with him through Europe; and as this tutor held the purse-strings, Wilkie was obliged to follow him through Germany, England, and Italy.

When he returned to Paris he was just twenty years old, and the very next day M. Patterson conducted him to the suite of rooms which he still occupied in the Rue du Helder. "You are now in your own home, M. Wilkie," said M. Patterson in his most impressive manner. "You are now old enough to be responsible for your own actions, and I hope you will conduct yourself like an honest man. From this moment you are your own master. Those who gave you your education desire you to study law. If I were in your place, I should obey them. If you wish to be somebody, and to acquire a fortune, work, for you have no property, nor anything to expect from any one. The allowance which is granted you, a far too liberal one in my opinion, may be cut off at any moment. I don't think it right to conceal this fact from you. But at all events until then, I am instructed to pay you five thousand francs quarterly. Here is the amount for the first quarter, and in three months' time I shall send you a similar amount. I say 'shall *send*,' because my business compels me to return to England, and take up my abode there. Here is my London address; and if any serious trouble befalls you, write to me. Now, my duty being fulfilled, farewell."

"Go to the devil, you old preacher!" growled Wilkie, as he saw the door close on the retreating figure of M. Patterson, who had acted as his guardian for ten years. None of M. Patterson's wise advice lingered in the young fellow's mind. To use a familiar expression, "It went in through one ear and came out through the other." Only two facts had made an impression upon him: that he was to be his own master henceforth, and that he had a fortune at his command. There it lay upon the table, five thousand francs in glittering gold.

If M. Wilkie had taken the trouble to attentively examine the rooms which had suddenly become his own, he would perhaps have recognised the fact that a loving hand had prepared them for his reception. Countless details revealed the delicate taste of a woman, and the thoughtful tenderness of a mother. None of those little superfluities which delight a young man had been forgotten. There was a box of choice cigars upon the table, and a jar of tobacco on the mantel-shelf. But Wilkie did not take time to discover this. He hastily slipped five hundred francs into his pocket, locked the rest of his money in a drawer, and went out with as lofty an air as if all Paris belonged to him, or as if he had enough money to purchase it.

He had resolved to give a *fête* in honour of his deliverance, and so he

hurried off in search of some of his old college chums. He found two of them; and, although it was very wounding to his self-love, M. Wilkie was obliged to confess to them that this was his first taste of liberty, and that he scarcely knew what to do with himself. Of course his friends assured him that they could quickly make him acquainted with the only life that it was worth while living; and, to prove it, they accepted the invitation to dinner which he immediately offered them. It was a remarkable repast. Other acquaintances dropped in, the wine flowed in rivers; and after dinner they danced. And at daybreak, having served his apprenticeship at *baccarat*, M. Wilkie found himself without a penny in his pocket, and face to face with a bill of four hundred francs, for which amount he was obliged to go to his rooms, under the escort of one of the waiters. This first experiment ought to have disgusted him, or at least have made him reflect. But no. He felt quite in his element in the society of dissipated young men and enamelled women. He swore that he would win a place in heir midst, and an influential place too. But it was easier to form this plan than to carry it into execution, as he discovered when, at the end of the month, he counted his money to see what remained of the five thousand francs that had been given him for his quarterly allowance. He had just three hundred francs left.

Twenty thousand francs a year is what one chooses to make it—wealth or poverty. Twenty thousand francs a year represents about sixty francs a day; but what are sixty francs to a high liver, who breakfasts and dines at the best restaurants, whose clothes are designed by an illustrious tailor, who declines to make a pair of trousers for less than a hundred francs? What are three louis a day to a man who hires a box for first performances at the opera, to a man who gambles and gives expensive suppers, to a man who drives out with yellow-haired demoiselles, and who owns a race-horse? Measuring his purse and his ambition, M. Wilkie discovered that he should never succeed in making both ends meet. "How do other people manage?" he wondered. A puzzling question! Every evening a thousand gorgeously apparelled gentlemen, with a cigar in their mouth and a flower in their button-hole, may be seen promenading between the Chaussée d'Antin and the Faubourg Montmartre. Everybody knows them, and they know everybody, but how they exist is a problem which it is impossible to solve. How do they live, and what do they live on? Everybody knows that they have no property; they do nothing, and yet they are reckless in their expenditures, and rail at work and jeer at economy. What source do they derive their money from? What vile business are they engaged in?

However, M. Wilkie did not devote much time to solving this question. "My relatives must wish me to starve," he said to himself. "Not I—I'm not that sort of a person, as I'll soon let them know." And thereupon he wrote to M. Patterson. By return of post that gentleman sent him a cheque for one thousand francs—a mere drop in the bucket. M. Wilkie felt indignant and so he wrote again. This time he was obliged to wait for a reply. Still at last it came. M. Patterson sent him two thousand francs, and an interminable epistle full of reproaches. The interesting young man threw the letter into the fire, and went out to hire a carriage by the month and a servant.

From that day forward, his life was spent in demanding money and waiting for it. He employed in quick succession every pretext that could soften the hearts of obdurate relatives, or find the way to the most closely-guarded cash-box. He was ill—he had contracted a debt of honour—he had impru-

dently lent money to an unscrupulous friend—he was about to be arrested for debt. And in accordance with the favourable or unfavourable character of the replies his manner became humble or impertinent, so that his friends soon learned to judge very accurately of the condition of his purse by the way he wore his moustaches. He became wise with experience, however; and on adding all the sums he had received together, he decided that his family must be very rich to allow him so much money. And this thought made him anxious to fathom the mystery of his birth and his infancy. He finally persuaded himself that he was the son of a great English nobleman —a member of the House of Lords, who was twenty times a millionaire. And he more than half believed it when he told his creditors that his lordship, his father, would some day or other come to Paris and pay all his debts. Unfortunately it was not M. Wilkie's noble father that arrived, but a letter from M. Patterson, which was couched as follows:

"My Dear Sir, a considerable sum was placed in my hands to meet your unexpected requirements; and in compliance with your repeated appeals, I have remitted the entire amount to you. Not a penny remains in my possession—so that my instructions have been fulfilled. Spare yourself the trouble of making any fresh demands; they will meet with no reply. In future you will not receive a penny above your allowance, which in my opinion is already too large a one for a young man of your age."

This letter proved a terrible blow to Wilkie. What should he do? He felt that M. Patterson would not revoke his decision; and indeed he wrote him several imploring letters, in vain. Yet never had his need of money been so urgent. His creditors were becoming uneasy; bills actually rained in upon his concierge; his next quarterly allowance was not due for some time to come, and it was only through the pawnbroker that he could obtain money for his more pressing requirements. He had begun to consider himself ruined. He saw himself reduced to dismissing his carriage, to selling his third share of Pompier de Nanterre and losing the esteem of all his witty friends.

He was in the depths of despair, when one morning his servant woke him up with the announcement that the Viscount de Coralth was in the sitting-room and wished to speak with him on very important business. It was not usually an easy task to entice M. Wilkie from his bed, but the name his servant mentioned seemed to have a prodigious effect upon him. He bounded on to the floor, and as he hastily dressed himself, he muttered: "The viscount here, at this hour! It's astonishing! What if he's going to fight a duel and wishes me to be his second? That would be a piece of grand good luck and no mistake. It would assure my position at once. Certainly something must have happened!"

This last remark was by no means a proof of any remarkable perspicuity on M. Wilkie's part. As M. de Coralth never went to bed until two or three o'clock in the morning he was by no means an early riser, and only some very powerful reason could explain the presence of his blue lined brougham, in the street before nine o'clock A.M. And the influence that had made him rise betimes in the present case had indeed been extremely powerful. Although the brilliant viscount had discovered Madame d'Argelès' secret, several months previously, he had so far disclosed it to no one. It was certainly not from any delicacy of feeling that he had held his peace; but only because it had not been for his interest to speak. Now, however, the sudden death of the Count de Chalusse changed the situation. He heard of the catastrophe at his club on the evening after the count's

death, and his emotion was so great that he actually declined to take part in a game of *baccarat* that was just beginning. "The devil!" he exclaimed. "Let me think a moment. Madame d'Argelès is the heiress of all these millions—will she come forward and claim them? From what I know of her, I am inclined to think that she won't. Will she ever go to Wilkie and confess that she, Lia d'Argelès, is a Chalusse, and that he is her illegitimate son? Never! She would rather relinquish her millions, both for herself and for him, than take such a step. She is so ridiculously antiquated in her notions." And then he began to study what advantages he might derive from his knowledge of the situation.

M. de Coralth, like all persons whose present is more or less uncertain, had great misgivings concerning his future. Just now he was cunning enough to find a means of procuring the thirty or forty thousand francs a year that were indispensable to his comfort; but he had not a farthing laid by, and the vein of silver he was now working might fail him at any moment. The slightest indiscretion, the least blunder, might hurl him from his splendour into the mire. The perspiration started out on his forehead when he thought of his peril. He passionately longed for a more assured position—for a little capital that would insure him his bread until the end of his days, and rid him of the grim phantom of poverty forever. And it was this desire which inspired him with the same plan that M. Fortunat had formed. "Why shouldn't I inform Wilkie?" he said to himself. "If I present him with a fortune, the simpleton ought certainly to give me some reward." But to carry this plan into execution it would be necessary to brave Madame d'Argelès' anger: and that was attended by no little danger. If he knew something about her, she on her side knew everything connected with his past life. She had only to speak to ruin him forever. Still, after weighing all the advantages and all the dangers, he decided to act, convinced that Madame d'Argelès might be kept ignorant of his treason providing he only played his cards skilfully. And his matutinal visit to M. Wilkie was caused by a fear that he might not be the only person knowing the truth, and that some one else might forestall him.

"You here, at sunrise, my friend!" exclaimed Wilkie, as he entered the room where the viscount was seated. "What has happened?"

"To me?—nothing," replied the viscount. "It was solely on your account that I deviated from my usual habits."

"What is it? You frighten me."

"Oh! don't be alarmed. I have only some good news to communicate," and in a careless tone which cleverly concealed his anxiety, the viscount added: "I have come, my dear Wilkie, to ask you what you would be willing to give the man who put you in possession of a fortune of several millions?"

M. Wilkie's face turned from white to purple at least three times in ten seconds; and it was in a strangely altered voice that he replied: "Ah! that's good—very good—excellent!" He tried his best to laugh, but he was completely overcome; and, in fact, he had cherished so many extravagant hopes that nothing seemed impossible to him.

"Never in all my life have I spoken more seriously," insisted the viscount.

His companion at first made no reply. It was easy to divine the conflict that was raging in his mind, between the hope that the news was true and the fear of being made the victim of a practical joke. "Come, my friend," he said at last, "do you want to poke fun at me? That wouldn't

be polite. A debtor is always sacred, and I owe you twenty-five louis. This is scarcely the time to talk of millions. My relatives have cut off my supplies; and my creditors are overwhelming me with their bills—"

But M. de Coralth checked him, saying gravely, "Upon my honour, I am not jesting. What would you give a man who—"

"I would give him half of the fortune he gave me."

"That's too much!"

"No, no!"

He was in earnest, certainly. What wouldn't a man promise in all sincerity of soul to a fellow mortal who gave him money when he had none—when he needed it urgently and must have it to save himself from ruin?

At such a moment no commission, however large, seems exorbitant. It is afterwards, when the day of settlement comes, that people begin to find fault with the rate of interest.

"If I tell you that one half is too much, it is because such is really the case. And I am the best judge of the matter since I am the man who can put you in possession of this enormous fortune."

M. Wilkie started back in speechless amazement.

"This astonishes you!" said the viscount, "and why, pray? Is it because I ask for a commission?"

"Oh! not at all!"

"It is not perhaps a very gentlemanly proceeding but it is a sensible one. Business is business. In the afternoon, when I am in a restaurant, at the club, or in a lady's boudoir, I am merely the viscount and the grand seigneur. All money questions sicken me. I am careless, liberal, and obliging to a fault. But in the morning I am simply Coralth, a man of the middle classes who doesn't pay his bills without examining them, and who watches his money, because he doesn't wish to be ruined and end his brilliant career as a common soldier in some foreign legion."

M. Wilkie did not allow him to continue. He believed, and his joy was wild—delirious. "Enough, enough!" he interrupted. "A difficulty between us! Never! I am yours without reserve! Do you understand me? How much must you have? Do you wish for it all?"

But the viscount was unmoved. "It is not fitting that I should fix upon the indemnity which is due to me. I will consult a man of business; and I will decide upon this point on the day after to-morrow, when I shall explain everything to you."

"On the day after to-morrow! You won't leave me in suspense for forty-eight hours?"

"It is unavoidable. I have still some important information to procure. I lost no time in coming to you, so that I might put you on your guard. If any scoundrel comes to you with proposals, be extremely careful. Some agents, when they obtain a hold on an estate, leave nothing for the rightful owner. So don't treat with any one."

"Oh, no! You may rest assured I won't."

"I should be quieter in mind if I had your promise in writing."

Without a word, Wilkie darted to a table, and wrote a short contract by which he bound himself to give M. Ferdinand de Coralth one half of the inheritance which the aforesaid Coralth might prove him to be entitled to. The viscount read the document, placed it in his pocket, and then said, as he took up his hat:

"Very well. I will see you again on Monday."

But M. Wilkie's doubts were begining to return. "Monday, so be it!" said he, "but swear that you are not deceiving me."

"What, do you still doubt me?"

M. Wilkie reflected for a moment; and suddenly a brilliant inspiration darted through his brain. "If you are speaking the truth, I shall soon be rich," said he. "But, in the meantime, life is hard. I haven't a penny, and it isn't a pleasant situation. I have a horse entered for the race to-morrow, Pompier de Nanterre. You know the animal very well. The chances are enormously in his favour. So, if it wouldn't inconvenience you to lend me fifty louis—'

"Certainly," interrupted the viscount cordially. "Certainly; with the greatest pleasure."

And drawing a beautiful little note-book from his pocket he took from it not one, but two bank notes of a thousand francs, and handed them to M. Wilkie, saying: "Monsieur believes me now, does he not?"

As will be readily believed, it was not for his own pleasure, that M. de Coralth postponed his confidential disclosures for a couple of days. He knew Wilkie perfectly well, and felt that it was dangerous to let him roam about Paris with half of an important secret. Postponement generally furnishes fate with weapons against oneself. But it was impossible for the viscount to act otherwise. He had not seen the Marquis de Valorsay since the Count de Chalusse's death and he dared not conclude the contract with Wilkie before he had conferred with him, for he was completely in the marquis's power. At the least suspicion of treason, M. de Valorsay would close his hand, and he, Coralth, would be crushed like an egg-shell. It was to the house of his formidable associate that he repaired on leaving M. Wilkie; and in a single breath he told the marquis all that he knew, and the plans that he had formed.

M. de Valorsay's astonishment must have been intense when he heard that Lia d'Argelès was a Chalusse, but he knew how to maintain his composure. He listened quietly, and when the viscount had completed his story, he asked: "Why did you wait so long before telling me all this?"

"I didn't see how it could interest you in the least."

The marquis looked at him keenly, and then calmly said: "In other words, you were waiting to see whether it would be most advantageous to you to be with me or against me."

"How can you think—"

"I don't think, I'm sure of it. As long as I was strong support for you, you were devoted to me. But now I am tottering, and you are ready to betray me."

"Excuse me! The step I am about to take—"

"What, haven't you taken it already?" interrupted the marquis, quickly. And shrugging his shoulders, he added: "Observe that I don't reproach you in the least. Only remember this: we survive or we perish together."

By the angry gleam in M. de Coralth's eyes, the marquis must have realised that his companion was disposed to rebel; still this knowledge did not seem to disquiet him, for it was in the same icy tone that he continued: "Besides, your plans, far from conflicting with mine, will be of service to me. Yes, Madame d'Argelès must lay claim to the count's estate. If she hesitates her son will compel her to urge her claims, will he not?"

"Oh, you may rest assured of that."

"And when he becomes rich, will you be able to retain your influence over him?"

"Rich or poor, I can mould him like wax."

"Very good. Marguerite was escaping me, but I shall soon have her in my power. I have a plan. The Fondège's think they can outwit me, but we shall soon see about that." The viscount was watching his companion stealthily; as the latter perceived, and so in a tone of brusque cordiality, he resumed: "Excuse me for not keeping you to breakfast, but I must go out immediately—Baron Trigault is waiting for me at his house. Let us part friends—*au revoir*—and, above all, keep me well posted about matters in general."

M. de Coralth's temper was already somewhat ruffled when he entered Valorsay's house; and he was in a furious passion when he left it. "So we are to survive or perish together?" he growled. "Thanks for the preference you display for my society. Is it my fault that the fool has squandered his fortune? I fancy I've had enough of his threats and airs."

Still his wrath was not so violent as to make him forget his own interests. He at once went to inquire if the agreement which M. Wilkie had just signed would be binding. The lawyer whom he consulted replied that, at all events, a reasonable compensation would most probably be granted by the courts, in case of any difficulty; and he suggested a little plan which was a *chef-d'œuvre* in its way, at the same time advising his client to strike the iron while it was hot.

It was not yet noon, and the viscount determined to act upon the suggestion at once; he now bitterly regretted the delay he had specified. "I must find Wilkie at once," he said to himself. But he did not succeed in meeting him until the evening, when he found him at the Café Riche—and in what a condition too! The two bottles of wine which the young fool had drank at dinner had gone to his head, and he was enumerating, in a loud voice, the desires he meant to gratify as soon as he came into possession of his millions. "What a brute!" thought the enraged viscount. "If I leave him to himself, no one knows what foolish thing he may do or say. I must remain with him until he becomes sober again."

So he followed him to the theatre, and thence to Brébant's, where he was sitting feeling terribly bored, when M. Wilkie conceived the unfortunate idea of inviting Victor Chupin to come up and take some refreshment. The scene which followed greatly alarmed the viscount. Who could this young man be? He did not remember having ever seen him before, and yet the young scamp was evidently well acquainted with his past life, for he had cast the name of Paul, in his face, as a deadly insult. Surely this was enough to make the viscount shudder! How did it happen that this young man had been just on the spot ready to pick up Wilkie's hat? Was it mere chance? Certainly not. He could not believe it. Then why was the fellow there? Evidently to watch somebody. And whom? Why, him—Coralth—undoubtedly.

In going through life as he had done, a man makes enemies at every step; and he had an imposing number of foes, whom he only held in check by his unbounded impudence and his renown as a duellist. Thus it was not strange if some one had set a snare for him; it was rather a miracle that he had not fallen into one before. The dangers that threatened him were so formidable that he was almost tempted to relinquish his attack on Madame d'Argelès. Was it prudent to incur the risk of making this woman an enemy? All Sunday he hesitated. It would be very easy to get out of the

scrape. He could concoct some story for Wilkie's benefit, and that would be the end of it. But on the other hand there was the prospect of netting at least five hundred thousand francs—a fortune—a competency, and the idea was too tempting to be relinquished.

So on Monday morning, at about ten o'clock, he presented himself at Wilkie's house, looking pale with anxiety, and far more solemn in manner than usual. "Let us say but little, and that to the point," he remarked on entering. "The secret I am about to reveal to you will make you rich; but it might ruin me if it were known that you obtained this information through me. You will therefore swear, upon your honour as a gentleman, never to betray me, under any circumstances, or for any reason."

M. Wilkie extended his hand and solemnly exclaimed, "I swear!"

"Very well, then. Now my mind is at rest. It is scarcely necessary for me to add that if you break your oath you are a dead man. You know me. You know how I handle a sword; and don't forget it." His manner was so threatening that Wilkie shuddered. "You will certainly be questioned," continued M. de Coralth; "but you must reply that you received the information through one of Mr. Patterson's friends. Now let us sign our formal contract in lieu of the temporary one you gave me the other day."

It is needless to say that Wilkie signed it eagerly. Not so the viscount; he read the document through carefully, before appending his signature, and then exclaimed: "The estate that belongs to you is that of the Count de Chalusse, your uncle. He leaves, I am informed, at least eight or ten millions of property."

By M. Wilkie's excited gestures, by the glitter in his eyes, it might have been supposed that this wonderful good fortune was too much for him, and that he was going mad. "I knew that I belonged to a noble family," he began. "The Count de Chalusse my uncle! I shall have a coronet on the corner of my visiting cards."

But with a gesture M. de Coralth silenced him. "Wait a little before you rejoice," said he. "Yes, your mother is the sister of the Count de Chalusse, and it is through her that you are an heir to the estate. But—don't grieve too much—there are similar misfortunes in many of our most distinguished families—circumstances—the obstinacy of parents—a love more powerful than reason—" The viscount paused, certainly he had no prejudices; but at the moment of telling this interesting young man who his mother really was, he hesitated.

"Go on," insisted M. Wilkie.

"Well—when your mother was a young girl, about twenty, she fled from her paternal home with a man she loved. Forsaken afterwards, she found herself in the depths of poverty. She was obliged to live. You were starving. So she changed her name, and now she is known as Lia d'Argelès."

M. Wilkie sprang to his feet. "Lia d'Argelès!" he exclaimed. Then, with a burst of laughter, he added: "Nevertheless, I think it a piece of grand good luck!"

VI.

"THIS man carries away your secret; you are lost." A sinister voice whispered these words in Madame Lia d'Argelès' heart when M. Isidore Fortunat, after being rudely dismissed, closed the door of her drawing-room behind him. This man had addressed her by the ancient and illustrious

name of Chalusse which she had not heard for twenty years, and which she had forbidden her own lips to pronounce. This man knew that she, Lia d'Argelès, was really a Durtal de Chalusse.

This frightful certainty overwhelmed her. It is true this man Fortunat had declared that his visit was entirely disinterested. He had pretended that his regard for the Chalusse family, and the compassion aroused in his heart by the unfortunate plight of Mademoiselle Marguerite, were the only motives that has influenced him in taking this step. However, Madame d'Argelès' experience in life had left her but limited faith in apparent or pretended disinterestedness. This is a practical age; chivalrous sentiments are expensive—as she had learned conclusively. "If the man came here," she murmured, "it was only because he thought he might derive some benefit from the prosecution of my claim to my poor brother's estate. In refusing to listen to his entreaties, I have deprived him of this expected profit and so I have made him my enemy. Ah! I was foolish to send him away like that! I ought to have pretended to listen—I ought to have bound him by all sorts of promises."

She suddenly paused. It occurred to her that M. Fortunat could not have gone very far; so that, if she sent for him to come back, she might perhaps be able to repair her blunder. Without losing a second, she rushed downstairs, and ordered her concierge and a servant to run after the gentleman who had just left the house, and ask him to return; to tell him that she had reflected, and wished to speak to him again. They rushed out in pursuit, and she remained in the courtyard, her heart heavy with anxiety. Too late! About a quarter of an hour afterwards her emissaries returned. They had made all possible haste in contrary directions, but they had seen no one in the street who at all resembled the person they were looking for. They had questioned the shopkeepers, but no one had seen him pass. "It doesn't matter," faltered Madame d'Argelès, in a tone that belied her words. And, anxious to escape the evident curiosity of her servants, she hastened back to the little boudoir where she usually spent her mornings.

M. Fortunat had left his card—that is to say, his address—and it would have been an easy matter to send a servant to his house. She was strongly tempted to do so; but she ultimately decided that it would be better to wait—that an hour more or less would make but little difference. She had sent her trusty servant, Job, for Baron Trigault; he would probably return with the baron at any moment: and the baron would advise her. He would know at once what was the best course for her to pursue. And so she waited for his coming in breathless anxiety; and the more she reflected, the more imminent her peril seemed, for she realized that M. Fortunat must be a very dangerous and cunning man. He had set a trap for her, and she had allowed herself to be caught. Perhaps he had only suspected the truth when he presented himself at the house. He had suddenly announced the death of the Count de Chalusse; she had betrayed herself; and any doubts he might have entertained were dispelled. "If I had only had sufficient presence of mind to deny it," she murmured. "If I had only been courageous enough to reply that I knew absolutely nothing about the person he spoke of. Ah! then he would have gone away convinced that he was mistaken."

But would the smooth-spoken visitor have declared that he knew everything, if he had not really penetrated the mystery of her life? It was scarcely probable. He had implored her to accept the property, if not for her own sake at least for the sake of another. And when she asked him

whom he meant he had answered, "Mademoiselle Marguerite," but he was undoubtedly thinking of Wilkie. So this man, this Isidore Fortunat, knew that she had a son. Perhaps he was even acquainted with him personally. In his anger he would very likely hasten to Wilkie's rooms and tell him everything. This thought filled the wretceed woman's heart with despair. What! Had she not yet expiated her fault? Must she suffer again?

For the first time a terrible doubt came over her. What she had formerly regarded as a most sublime effort of maternal love, was, perhaps, even a greater crime than the first she had committed. She had given her honour as the price of her son's happiness and prosperity. Had she a right to do so? Did not the money she had lavished upon him contain every germ of corruption, misfortune, and shame? How terrible Wilkie's grief and rage would be if he chanced to hear the truth!

Alas! he would certainly pay no heed to the extenuating circumstances; he would close his ears to all attempts at justification. He would be pitiless. He would have naught but hatred and scorn to bestow upon a mother who had fallen from the highest rank in society down to everlasting infamy. She fancied she heard him saying in an indignant voice, "It would have been better to have allowed me to die of starvation than to have given me bread purchased at such a price! Why have you dishonoured me by your ill-gotten wealth? Fallen, you might have raised yourself by honest toil. You ought to have made me a labourer, and not a spoiled idler, incapable of earning an honest livelihood. As the son of a poor, betrayed, and deserted woman, with whom I could have shared my scanty earnings, I might have looked the world proudly in the face. But where can the son of Lia d'Argelès hide his disgrace after playing the gentleman for twenty years with Lia d'Argelès' money?" Yes, Wilkie would certainly say this if he ever learned the truth; and he would learn it—she felt sure of it. How could she hope to keep a secret which was known to Baron Trigault, M. Patterson, the Viscount de Coralth, and M. Fortunat—four persons! She had confidence in the first two; she believed she had a hold on the third, but the fourth—Fortunat!

The hours went by; and still Job did not return. What was the meaning of this delay? Had he failed to find the baron? At last the sound of carriage-wheels in the courtyard made her start. "That's Job!" she said to herself. "He brings the baron."

Alas! no. Job returned alone. And yet the honest fellow had spared neither pains nor horseflesh. He had visited every place where there was the least probability of finding the baron, and he was everywhere told that Baron Trigault had not been seen for several days. "In that case you ought to have gone to his house. Perhaps he is there," remarked Madame d'Argelès.

"Madame knows that the baron is never at home. I did go there, however, but in vain."

This chanced to be one of three consecutive days which Baron Trigault had spent with Kami-Bey, the Turkish ambassador. It had been agreed between them that they should play until one or the other had lost five hundred thousand francs; and, in order to prevent any waste of "precious time," as the baron was wont to remark, they neither of them stirred from the Grand Hotel, where Kami-Bey had a suite of rooms. They ate and slept there. By some strange chance, Madame d'Argelès had not heard of this duel with bank-notes, although nothing else was talked of at the clubs; indeed the *Figaro* had already published a minute description of

the apartment where the contest was going on; and every evening it gave the results. According to the latest accounts, the baron had the advan tage; he had won about two hundred and eighty thousand francs.

"I only returned to inform madame, that I had so far been unsuccessful," said Job. "But I will recommence the search at once."

"That is unnecessary," replied Madame d'Argelès. "The baron will undoubtedly drop in this evening, after dinner, as usual."

She said this, and tried her best to believe it; but in her secret heart she felt that she could no longer depend upon the baron's assistance. "I wounded him this morning," she thought. "He went away more angry than I had ever seen him before. He is incensed with me; and who knows how long it will be before he comes again?"

Still she waited, with feverish anxiety, listening breathlessly to every sound in the street, and trembling each time she heard or fancied she heard a carriage stop at the door. However, at two o'clock in the morning the baron had not made his appearance. "It is too late—he won't come!" she murmured.

But now her sufferings were less intolerable, for excess of wretchedness had deadened her sensibility. Utter prostration paralyzed her energies and benumbed her mind. Ruin seemed so inevitable that she no longer thought of avoiding it; she awaited it with that blind resignation displayed by Spanish women, who, when they hear the roll of thunder, fall upon their knees, convinced that lightning is about to strike their defenceless heads. She tottered to her room, flung herself on the bed, and instantly fell asleep. Yes, she slept the heavy, leaden slumber which always follows a great mental crisis, and which falls like God's blessing upon a tortured mind. On waking up, her first act was to ring for her maid, in order to send a message to Job, to go out again in search of the baron. But the faithful servant had divined his mistress's wishes, and had already started off of his own accord. It was past mid-day when he returned, but his face was radiant; and it was in a triumphant voice that he announced: "Monsieur le Baron Trigault."

Madame d'Argelès sprang up, and greeted the baron with a joyful exclamation. "Ah! how kind of you to come!" she exclaimed. "You are most welcome. If you knew how anxiously I have been waiting for you!" He made no reply. "If you knew," continued Madame d'Argelès, "if you only knew—"

But she paused, for in spite of her own agitation, she was suddenly struck by the peculiar expression on her visitor's face. He was standing silent and motionless in the centre of the room, and his eyes were fixed upon her with a strange, persistent stare in which she could read all the contradictory feelings which were battling for mastery in his mind—anger, hatred, pity, and forgiveness. Madame d'Argelès shuddered. So her cup of sorrow was not yet full. A new misfortune was about to fall upon her. She had hoped that the baron would be able to alleviate her wretchedness, but it seemed as if he were fated to increase it. "Why do you look at me like that?" she asked anxiously. "What have I done?"

"You, my poor Lia—nothing!"

"Then—what is it? Oh, my God! you frighten me."

"What is it? Well, I am going to tell you," he said, as he stepped forward and took her hand in his own. "You know that I have been infamously duped and deceived, that the happiness of my life has been destroyed by a scoundrel who tempted the wife I so fondly loved to forget

her duty, and trample her honour under foot. You have heard my vows of vengeance if I ever succeeded in discovering him. Ah, well, Lia, I have discovered him. The man who stole my share of earthly happiness was the Count de Chalusse, your brother."

With a sudden gesture Madame d'Argelès freed her hand from the baron's grasp, and recoiled as terrified as if she had seen a spectre rise up before her. Then with her hands extended as if to ward off the horrible apparition, she exclaimed: "O, my God!"

A bitter smile curved the baron's lips. "What do you fear?" he asked. "Isn't your brother dead? He has defrauded me alike of happiness and vengeance!"

If her son's life had depended on a single word, Madame d'Argelès could not have uttered it. She knew what mental agony had urged the baron to a sort of moral suicide, and led him to contract the vice in which he wasted his life and squandered, or, at least risked, his millions.

"Nor is this all," he continued. "Listen. As I have often told you, I was sure that my wife became a mother in my absence. I sought the child for years, hoping that through the offspring I might discover the father. Ah, well! I've found what I sought, at last. The child is now a beautiful young girl. She lives at the Hôtel de Chalusse as your brother's daughter. She is known as Mademoiselle Marguerite."

Madame d'Argelès listened, leaning against the wall for support, and trembling like a leaf. Her reason was shaken by so many repeated blows, and her son, her brother, Marguerite, Pascal Ferailleur, Coralth, Valorsay —all those whom she loved or feared, or hated—rose like spectres before her troubled brain. The horror of the truth exceeded her most frightful apprehensions. The strangeness of the reality surpassed every flight of fancy. And, moreover, the baron's calmness increased her stupor. She so often had heard him give vent to his rage and despair in terrible threats, that she could not believe he would be thus resigned. But was his calmness real? Was it not a mask, would not his fury suddenly break forth?

However, he continued, "It is thus that destiny makes us its sport—it is thus that it laughs at our plans. Do you remember, Lia, the day when I met you wandering through the streets of Paris—with your child in your arms—pale and half-dead with fatigue, faint for want of food, homeless and penniless. You saw no refuge but in death, as you have since told me. How could I imagine when I rescued you that I was saving my greatest enemy's sister from suicide—the sister of the man whom I was vainly pursuing? And yet this might not be the end, if I chose to have it otherwise. The count is dead, but I can still return him disgrace for disgrace. He dishonoured me. What prevents me from casting ineffaceable opprobrium upon the great name of Chalusse, of which he was so proud? He seduced my wife. To-day I can tell all Paris what his sister has been and what she is to-day."

Ah! it was this—yes, it was this that Madame d'Argelès had dreaded. See fell upon her knees, and, with clasped hands she entreated: "Pity!—oh! have pity—forgive me! Have mercy! Have I not always been a faithful and devoted friend to you? Think of the past you have just invoked! Who helped you then to bear your intolerable sufferings? Don't you remember the day when you, yourself, had determined to die by your own hand? There was a woman who persuaded you to abandon the thought of suicide. It was I!"

He looked at her for a moment with a softer expression, tears came to

his eyes, and rolled down his cheeks. Then suddenly he raised her, and placed her in an arm-chair, exclaiming: "Ah! you know very well that I shall not do what I said. Don't you know me better than that? Are you not sure of my affection, are you not aware that you are sacred in my eyes?" He was evidently striving hard to master his emotion. "Besides," he added, "I had already pardoned before coming here. It was foolish on my part, perhaps, and for nothing in the world would I confess it to my acquaintances, but it is none the less true. I shall have my revenge in a certain fashion, however. I need only hold my peace, and the daughter of M. de Chalusse and Madame Trigault would become a lost woman. Is this not so? Very well, I shall offer her my assistance. It may, or may not, be another absurd and ridiculous fancy added to the many I have been guilty of. But no matter. I have promised. And why indeed should this poor girl be held responsible for the sins of her parents? I—I declare myself on her side against the world!"

Madame d'Argelès rose, her face radiant with joy and hope. "Then perhaps we are saved!" she exclaimed. "Ah! I knew when I sent for you that I should not appeal to your heart in vain!"

She took hold of his hand as if to raise it to her lips; but he gently withdrew it, and inquired, with an air of astonishment: "What do you mean?"

"That I have been cruelly punished for not wishing you to assist that unfortunate man who was dishonoured here the other evening."

"Pascal Ferailleur?"

"Yes, he is innocent. The Viscount de Coralth is a scoundrel. It was he who slipped the cards which made M. Ferailleur win, into the pack, and he did it at the Marquis de Valorsay's instigation."

The baron looked at Madame d'Argelès with profound amazement. "What!" said he, "you knew this and you allowed it? You were cruel enough to remain silent when that innocent man entreated you to testify on his behalf! You allowed this atrocious crime to be executed under your own roof, and under your very eyes?"

"I was then ignorant of Mademoiselle Marguerite's existence. I did not know that the young man was beloved by my brother's daughter—I did not know—"

The baron interrupted her, and exclaimed, indignantly: "Ah! what does that matter? It was none the less an abominable action."

She hung her head, and in a scarcely audible voice, replied, "I was not free. I submited to a will that was stronger than my own. If you had heard M. de Coralth's threats you would not censure me so severely. He has discovered my secret; he knows Wilkie— I am in his power. Don't frown—I make no attempt to excuse myself—I am only explaining the position in which I was placed. My peril is imminent; I have only confidence in you—you alone can aid me; listen!"

Thereupon she hastily explained M. de Coralth's position respecting herself, what she had been able to ascertain concerning the Marquis de Valorsay's plans, the alarming visit she had received from M. Fortunat, his advice and insinuations, the dangers she apprehended, and her firm determination to deliver Mademoiselle Marguerite from the machinations of her enemies. Madame d'Argelès' disclosures formed, as it were, a sequel to the confidential revelations of Pascal Ferailleur, and the involuntary confession of the Marquis de Valorsay; and the baron could no longer doubt the existence of the shameful intrigue which had been planned in view of

obtaining possession of the count's millions. And if he did not, at first, understand the motives, he at least began to discern what means had been employed. He now understood why Valorsay persisted in his plan of marrying Mademoiselle Marguerite, even without a fortune. "The wretch knows through Coralth that Madame d'Argelès is a Chalusse," he said to himself; "and when Mademoiselle Marguerite has become his wife, he intends to oblige Madame d'Argelès to accept her brother's estate and share it with him."

At that same moment Madame d'Argelès finished her narrative. "And now, what shall I do?" she added.

The baron was stroking his chin, as was his usual habit when his mind was deeply exercised. "The first thing to be done," he replied, "is to show Coralth in his real colours, and prove M. Ferailleur's innocence. It will probably cost me a hundred thousand francs to do so, but I shall not grudge the money. I should probably spend as much or even more in play next summer; and the amount had better be spent in a good cause than in swelling the dividends of my friend Blanc, at Baden."

"But M. de Coralth will speak out as soon as he finds that I have revealed his shameful past."

"Let him speak."

Madame d'Argelès shuddered. "Then the name of Chalusse will be disgraced," said she; "and Wilkie will know who his mother is."

"No."

"But—"

"Ah! allow me to finish, my dear friend. I have my plan, and it is as plain as daylight. This evening you will write to your London correspondent. Request M. Patterson to summon your son to England, under any pretext whatever; let him pretend that he wishes to give him some money, for instance. He will go there of course, and then we will keep him there. Coralth certainly won't run after him, and we shall have nothing more to fear on that score."

"Great heavens!" murmured Madame d'Argelès, "why did this idea never occur to me?"

The baron had now completely recovered his composure. "As regards yourself," said he, "the plan you ought to adopt is still more simple. What is your furniture worth? About a hundred thousand francs, isn't it? Very well, then. You will sign me notes, dated some time back, to the amount of a hundred thousand francs. On the day these notes fall due, on Monday, for instance, they will be presented for payment. You will refuse to pay them. A writ will be served, and an attachment placed upon your furniture; but you will offer no resistance. I don't know if I explain my meaning very clearly."

"Oh, very clearly!"

"So your property is seized. You make no opposition, and next week we shall have flaming posters on all the walls, telling Paris that the furniture, wardrobe, cashmeres, laces, and diamonds of Madame Lia d'Argelès will be sold without reserve, at public auction, in the Rue Drouot, with the view of satisfying the claims of her creditors. You can imagine the sensation this announcement will create. I can see your friends and the frequenters of your drawing-room meeting one another in the street, and saying: 'Ah, well! what's this about poor D'Argelès?' 'Pshaw!—no doubt it's a voluntary sale.' 'Not at all; she's really ruined. Everything is mortgaged above its value.' 'Indeed, I'm very sorry to hear it. She

was a good creature.' 'Oh excellent; a deal of amusement could be found at her house,—only between you and me——' 'Well?' 'Well, she was no longer young.' 'That's true. However, I shall attend the sale, and I think I shall bid.' And, in fact, your acquaintances won't fail to repair to the Hôtel Drouot, and maybe your most intimate friends will yield to their generous impulses sufficiently to offer twenty sous for one of the dainty trifles on your *étagères.*"

Overcome with shame, Madame d'Argelès hung her head. She had never before so keenly felt the disgrace of her situation. She had never so clearly realised what a deep abyss she had fallen into. And this crushing humiliation came from whom? From the only friend she possessed—from the man who was her only hope, Baron Trigault.

And what made it all the more frightful was, that he did not seem to be in the least degree conscious of the cruelty of his words. Indeed, he continued, in a tone of bitter irony: "Of course, you will have an exhibition before the sale, and you will see all the dolls that hairdressers, milliners and fools call great ladies, come running to the show. They will come to see how a notorious woman lives, and to ascertain if there are any good bargains to be had. This is the right form. These great ladies would be delighted to display diamonds purchased at the sale of a woman of the *demi monde.* Oh! don't fear—your exhibition will be visited by my wife and daughter, by the Viscountess de Bois d'Ardon, by Madame de Rochecote, her five daughters, and a great many more. Then the papers will take up the refrain; they will give an account of your financial difficulties, and tell the public what you paid for your pictures."

It was with a sort of terror-stricken curiosity that Madame d'Argelès watched the baron. It had been many years since she had seen him in such a frame of mind—since she had heard him talk in such a cynical fashion. "I am ready to follow your advice," said she, "but afterwards?"

"What, don't you understand the object I have in view? Afterwards you will disappear. I know five or six journalists; and it would be very strange if I could not convince one of them that you had died upon an hospital pallet. It will furnish the subject of a touching, and what is better, a moral article. The papers will say, 'Another star has disappeared. This is the miserable end of all the poor wretches whose passing luxury scandalizes honest women.'"

"And what will become of me?"

"A respected woman, Lia. You will go to England, install yourself in some pretty cottage near London, and create a new identity for yourself. The proceeds of your sale will supply your wants and Wilkie's for more than a year. Before that time has elapsed you will have succeeded in accumulating the necessary proofs of your identity, and then you can assert your claims and take possession of your brother's estate."

Madame d'Argelès sprang to her feet. "Never! never!" she exclaimed, vehemently.

The baron evidently thought he must have misunderstood her. "What!" he stammered, "you will relinquish the millions that are legally yours, to the government?"

"Yes—I am resolved—it must be so."

"Will you sacrifice your son's future in this style."

"No, it isn't in my power to do that; but Wilkie will do so, later on, I'm sure of it."

"But this is simply folly."

A feverish agitation had now succeeded Madame d'Argelès' torpor; there was an expression of scorn and anger on her rigid features, and her eyes, usually so dull and lifeless, fairly blazed. "It is not folly," she exclaimed, "but vengeance!" And as the astonished baron opened his lips to question her. "Let me finish," she said imperiously, "and then you shall judge me. I have told you with perfect frankness everything concerning my past life, save this—this—that I am married, Monsieur le Baron, legally married. I am bound by a chain that nothing can break, and my husband is a scoundrel. You would be frightened if you knew half the extent of his villainy. Oh! do not shake your head. I ought not to be suspected of exaggeration when I speak in this style of a man whom I once loved so devotedly. For I loved him, alas!—even to madness—loved him so much that I forgot self, family, honour, and all the most sacred duties. I loved him so madly that I was willing to follow him, while his hands were still wet with my brother's blood. Ah! chastisement could not fail to come, and it was terrible, like the sin. This man for whom I had abandoned everything—whom I had made my idol—do you know what he said to me the third day after my flight from home? 'You must be more stupid than an owl to have forgotten to take your jewels.' Yes, those were the very words he said to me, with a furious air. And then I could measure the depths of the abyss into which I had plunged. This man, with whom I had been so infatuated, did not love me at all, he had never loved me. It had only been cold calculation on his part. He had devoted months to the task of winning my heart, just as he would have devoted them to some business transaction. He only saw in me the fortune that I was to inherit. Oh! he didn't conceal it from me. "'If your parents are not monsters,' he was always saying, 'they will finally become reconciled to our marriage. They will give you a handsome fortune and we will divide it. I will give you back your liberty, and then we can each of us be happy in our own way.' It was for this reason that he wished to marry me. I consented on account of my unborn child. My father and mother had died, and he hoped to prevail upon me to claim my share of the paternal fortune. As for claiming it himself, he dared not. He was a coward, and he was afraid of my brother. But I took a solemn oath that he should never have a farthing of the wealth he coveted, and neither threats nor *blows* could compel me to assert my claim. God only knows how much I had suffered from his brutality when I at last succeeded in making my escape with Wilkie. He has sought us everywhere for fifteen years, but he has not yet succeeded in finding a trace of us. Still he has not ceased to watch my brother. I am sure of that, my presentiments never decieve me. So, if I followed your advice—if I claimed possession of my brother's fortune—my husband would instantly appear with our marriage contract in his hands, and demand everything. Shall I enrich him? No, never, never! I would rather die of want! I would rather see Wilkie die of starvation before my very eyes!"

Madame d'Argelès spoke in that tone of concentrated rage which betrays years of repressed passion and unflinching resolution. One could scarcely hope to modify her views even by the wisest and most practical advice. The baron did not even think of attempting to do so. He had known Madame d'Argelès for years; he had seen so many proofs of her invincible energy and determination. She possessed the distinguishing characteristic of her family in a remarkable degree—that proverbial Chalusse obstinacy

which Madame Vantrasson had alluded to in her conversation with M. Fortunat.

She was silent for a moment, and then, in a firm tone she said: "Still I will follow your advice in part, baron. This evening I will write to M. Patterson and request him to send for Wilkie. In less than a fortnight I shall have sold my furniture and disappeared. I shall remain poor. My fortune is not so large as people suppose. No matter. My son is a man: he must learn to earn his own living."

"My banking account is always at your disposal, Lia."

"Thanks, my friend, thanks a thousand times; but it will not be necessary for me to accept your kind offer. When Wilkie was a child I did not refuse. But now I would dig the ground with my own hands, rather than give him a louis that came from you. You think me full of contradictions! Perhaps I am. It is certain that I am no longer what I was yesterday. This trouble has torn away the bandage that covered my eyes. I can see my conduct clearly now, and I condemn it. I sinned for my son's sake, more than for my own. But I might have rehabilitated myself through him, and now he will perhaps be dishonoured through me." Her breathing came short and hard, and it was in a choked voice that she continued: "Wilkie shall work for me and for himself. If he is strong, he will save us. If he is weak—ah, well! we shall perish. But there has been cowardice and shame enough! It shall never be said that I sacrificed the honour of a noble name and the happiness of my brother's child to my son. I see what my duty is, and I shall do it."

The baron nodded approvingly. "That's no doubt right," said he. "Only allow me to tell you that all is not lost yet. The code has a weapon for every just cause. Perhaps there will be a way for you to obtain and hold your fortune independent of your husband."

"Alas! I made inquiries on the subject years ago, and I was told that it would be impossible. Still, you might investigate the matter. I have confidence in you. I know that you would not advise me rashly;—but don't delay. The worst misfortune would be less intolerable than this suspense."

"I will lose no time. M. Ferailleur is a very clever lawyer, I am told. I will consult him."

"And what shall I do about this man Fortunat, who called upon me?"

The baron reflected for a moment. "The safest thing would be to take no action whatever at present," he replied. "If he has any evil designs, a visit or a letter from you would only hasten them."

By the way Madame d'Argelès shook her head, it was easy to see that she had very little hope. "All this will end badly," she murmured.

The baron shared her opinion, but he did not think it wise or kind to discourage her. "Nonsense!" he said lightly, "luck is going to change; it is always changing."

Then as he heard the clock strike, he sprang from his arm-chair in dismay. "Two o'clock," he exclaimed, "and Kami-Bey is waiting for me. I certainly haven't been wasting time here, but I ought to have been at the Grand Hotel at noon. Kami is quite capable of suspecting a man of any knavery. These Turks are strange creatures. It's true that I am now a winner to the tune of two hundred and eighty thousand francs." He settled his hat firmly on his head, and opening the door, he added: "Good-bye, my dear madame, I will soon see you again, and in the meantime don't deviate in the least from your usual habits. Our success depends, in a great measure, upon the fancied security of our enemies!"

Madame d'Argelès considered this advice so sensible that half-an-hour later she went out for her daily drive in the Bois, little suspecting that M. Fortunat's spy, Victor Chupin, was dogging her carriage. It was most imprudent on her part to have gone to Wilkie's house on her return. She incurred such a risk of awakening suspicion by wandering about near her son's home that she seldom allowed herself that pleasure, but sometimes her anxiety overpowered her reason. So, on this occasion, she ordered the coachman to stop near the Rue du Helder, and she reached the street just in time to betray her secret to Victor Chupin, and receive a foul insult from M. Wilkie. The latter's cruel words stabbed her to the heart, and yet she tried to construe them as mere proofs of her son's honesty of feeling—as proof of his scorn for the depraved creatures who haunt the boulevards each evening. But though her energy was indomitable, her physical strength was not equal to her will. On returning home, she felt so ill that she was obliged to go to bed. She shivered with cold, and yet the blood that flowed in her veins seemed to her like molten lead. The physician who was summoned declared that her illness was a mere trifle, but prescribed rest and quiet. And as he was a very discerning man, he added, not without a malicious smile, that any excess is injurious—excess of pleasure as well as any other. As it was Sunday, Madame d'Argelès was able to obey the physician, and so she closed her doors against every one, the baron excepted. Still, fearing that this seclusion might seem a little strange, she ordered her concierge to tell any visitors that she had gone into the country, and would not return until her usual reception-day. She would then be compelled to open her doors as usual. For what would the *habitués* of the house, who had played there every Monday for years, say if they found the doors closed? She was less her own mistress than an actress—she had no right to weep or suffer in solitude.

So, at about seven o'clock on Monday evening, although still grievously suffering both in mind and body, she arranged herself to receive her guests. From among all her dresses, she chose the same dark robe she had worn on the night when Pascal Ferailleur was ruined at her house; and as she was even paler than usual, she tried to conceal the fact by a prodigal use of *rouge*. At ten o'clock, when the first arrivals entered the brilliantly lighted rooms, they found her seated as usual on the sofa, near the fire, with the same eternal, unchangeable smile upon her lips. There were at least forty persons in the room, and the gambling had become quite animated when the baron entered. Madame d'Argelès read in his eyes that he was the bearer of good news. "Everything is going on well," he whispered, as he shook hands with her. "I have seen M. Ferailleur—I wouldn't give ten sous for Valorsay's and Coralth's chances."

This intelligence revived Madame d'Argelès' drooping spirits, and she received M. de Coralth with perfect composure when he came to pay his respects to her soon afterwards. For he had the impudence to come, in order to dispel any suspicions that might have been aroused anent his complicity in the card cheating affair. The hostess's calmness amazed him. Was she still ignorant of her brother's death and the complications arising from it, or was she only acting a part? He was so anxious and undecided, that instead of mingling with the groups of talkers, he at once took a seat at the card-table whence he could watch the poor woman's every movement.

Both rooms were full, and almost everybody was engaged in play, when, shortly after midnight, a servant entered the room, whispered a few words in his mistress's ear and handed her a card. She took it, glanced at it, and

uttered so harsh, so terrible, so heart-broken a cry, that several of the guests sprang to their feet. "What is it? What is it?" they asked. She tried to reply, but could not. Her lips parted, she opened her mouth, but no sound came forth. She turned ghastly white under her rouge, and a wild, unnatural light gleamed in her eyes. One curious guest, without a thought of harm, tried to take the card, which she still held in her clinched hand; but she repulsed him with such an imperious gesture that he recoiled in terror. "What is it? What is the matter with her?" was the astonished query on every side.

At last, with a terrible effort, she managed to reply, "Nothing." And then, after clinging for a moment to the mantel-shelf, in order to steady herself, she tottered out of the room.

VII.

It was not enough to tell M. Wilkie the secret of his birth. He must be taught how to utilise the knowledge. The Viscount de Coralth devoted himself to this task, and burdened Wilkie with such a host of injunctions, that it was quite evident he had but a poor opinion of his pupil's sagacity. "That woman d'Argelès," he thought, "is as sharp as steel. She will deceive this young idiot completely, if I don't warn him."

So he did warn him; and Wilkie was instructed exactly what to do and say, how to answer any questions, and what position to take up according to circumstances. Moreover, he was especially enjoined to distrust tears, and not to let himself be put out of countenance by haughty airs. The viscount spent at least an hour in giving explanations and advice, to the great disgust of M. Wilkie, who feeling that he was being treated like a child, somewhat testily declared that he was no fool, and that he knew how to take care of himself as well as any one else. Still this did not prevent M. de Coralth from persisting in his instructions until he was persuaded that he had prepared his pupil for all possible emergencies. He then rose to depart. "That's all, I think," he remarked, with a shade of uneasiness. "I've traced the plan—you must execute it, and keep cool, or the game's lost."

His companion rose proudly. "If it fails, it won't be from any fault of mine," he answered with unmistakeable petulance.

"Lose no time."

"There's no danger of that."

"And understand, that whatever happens, my name is not to be mentioned."

"Yes, yes."

"If there should be any new revelations, I will inform you."

"At the club?"

"Yes, but don't be uneasy; the affair is as good as concluded."

"I hope so, indeed."

Wilkie gave a sigh of relief as he saw his visitor depart. He wished to be alone, so as to brood over the delights that the future had in store for him. He was no longer to be limited to a paltry allowance of twenty thousand francs! No more debts, no more ungratified longings. He would have millions at his disposal! He seemed to see them, to hold them, to feel them gliding in golden waves between his fingers! What horses he would have! what carriages! what mistresses! And a gleam of envy that

he had detected in M. de Coralth's eyes put the finishing touch to his bliss. To be envied by this brilliant viscount, his model and his ideal, what happiness it was!

The reputation that Madame d'Argelès bore had at first cast a shadow over his joy; but this shadow had soon vanished. He was troubled by no foolish prejudices, and personally he cared little or nothing for his mother's reputation. The prejudices of society must, of course, be considered. But nonsense! society has no prejudices now-a-days when millionaires are concerned, and asks no questions respecting their parents. Society only requires passports of the indigent. Besides, no matter what Madame d'Argelès might have done, she was none the less a Chalusse, the descendant of one of the most aristocratic families in France.

Such were Wilkie's meditations while he was engaged in dressing himself with more than usual care. He had been quite shocked by the suggestion that Madame d'Argelès might try to deny him, and he wished to appear before her in the most advantageous light. His toilette was consequently a lengthy operation. However, shortly after twelve o'clock he was ready. He cast a last admiring glance at himself in the mirror, twirled his moustaches, and departed on his mission. He even went on foot, which was a concession to what he considered M. de Coralth's absurd ideas. The aspect of the Hôtel d'Argelès, in the Rue de Berry, impressed him favourably, but, at the same time, it somewhat disturbed his superb assurance. "Everything is very stylish here," he muttered.

A couple of servants—the concierge and Job—were standing at the door engaged in conversation. M. Wilkie approached them, and in his most imposing manner, but not without a slight tremble in his voice, requested to see Madame d'Argelès. "Madame is in the country," replied the concierge; "she will not return before this evening. If monsieur will leave his card—"

"Oh! that's quite unnecessary. I shall be passing again."

This, too, was in obedience to the instructions of M. de Coralth, who had advised him not to send in his name, but to gain admission into Madame d'Argelès' presence as speedily as possible, without giving her time to prepare herself for the interview; and Wilkie had ultimately decided that these precautions might not prove as superfluous as he had at first supposed. But this first mishap annoyed him extremely. What should he do? how should he kill time till the evening? A cab was passing. He hired it for a drive to the Bois, whence he returned to the boulevards, played a game of billiards with one of the co-proprietors of Pompier de Nanterre, and finally dined at the Café Riche, devoting as much time as possible to the operation. He was finishing his coffee when the clock struck eight. He caught up his hat, drew on his gloves, and hastened to the Hôtel d'Argelès again.

"Madame has not yet returned," said the concierge, who knew that his mistress had only just risen from her bed, "but I don't think it will be long. And if monsieur wishes—"

"No," replied M. Wilkie brusquely, and he was going off in a furious passion, when, on crossing the street, he chanced to turn his head and notice that the reception rooms were brilliantly lighted up. "Ah! I think that a very shabby trick!" grumbled the intelligent youth. "They won't succeed in playing that game on me again. Why, she's there now!"

It occurred to him that Madame d'Argelès had perhaps described him to her servants, and had given them strict orders not to admit him. "I'll

find out if that is the case, even if I have to wait here until to-morrow morning," he thought, angrily. However, he had not been on guard very long, when he saw a brougham stop in front of the mansion, whereupon the gate opened, as if by enchantment. The vehicle entered the courtyard, deposited its occupants, and drove away. A second carriage soon appeared, then a third, and then five or six in quick succession. "And does she think I'll wear out my shoe leather here, while everybody else is allowed to enter?" he grumbled. "Never!—I've an idea." And, without giving himself time for further deliberation, he returned to his rooms, arrayed himself in evening-dress, and sent for his carriage. "You will drive to No. — in the Rue de Berry," he said. "There is a *soirée* there, and you can drive directly into the courtyard." The coachman obeyed, and M. Wilkie realised that his idea was really an excellent one.

As soon as he alighted, the doors were thrown open, and he ascended a handsome staircase, heavily carpeted, and adorned with flowers. Two liveried footmen were standing at the door of the drawing-room, and one of them advanced to relieve Wilkie of his overcoat, but his services were declined. "I don't wish to go in," said the young man roughly. "I wish to speak with Madame d'Argelès in private. She is expecting me—inform her. Here is my card."

The servant was hesitating, when Job, suspecting some mystery perhaps, approached. "Take in the gentleman's card," he said, with an air of authority; and, opening the door of a small room on the left hand side of the staircase, he invited Wilkie to enter, saying, "If monsieur will be kind enough to take a seat, I will summon madame at once."

M. Wilkie sank into an arm-chair, considerably overcome. The air of luxury that pervaded the entire establishment, the liveried servants, the lights and flowers, all impressed him much more deeply than he would have been willing to confess. And in spite of his affected arrogance, he felt that the superb assurance which was the dominant trait in his character was deserting him. In his breast, moreover, in the place where physiologists locate the heart, he felt certain extraordinary movements which strongly resembled palpitations. For the first time it occurred to him that this woman, whose peace he had come to destroy, was not only the heiress of the Count de Chalusse's millions, but also his mother, that is to say, the good fairy whose protection had followed him everywhere since he entered the world. The thought that he was about to commit an atrocious act entered his mind, but he drove it away. It was too late now to draw back, or even to reflect.

Suddenly a door opposite the one by which he had entered opened, and Madame d'Argelès appeared on the threshold. She was no longer the woman whose anguish and terror had alarmed her guests. During the brief moment of respite which fate had granted her, she had summoned all her energy and courage, and had mastered her despair. She felt that her salvation depended upon her calmness, and she had succeeded in appearing calm, haughty, and disdainful—as impassive as if she had been a statue. "Was it you, sir, who sent me this card?" she inquired.

Greatly disconcerted, M. Wilkie could only bow and stammer out an almost unintelligible answer. "Excuse me! I am much grieved, upon my word! I disturb you, perhaps—"

"You are Monsieur Wilkie!" interrupted Madame d'Argelès, in a tone of mingled irony and disdain.

"Yes," he replied, drawling out the name affectedly, "I am M. Wilkie."

"Did you desire to speak with me?" inquired Madame d'Argelès drily.

"In fact—yes. I should like—"

"Very well. I will listen to you, although your visit is most inopportune, for I have eighty guests or more in my drawing-room. Still, speak!"

It was very easy to say "speak," but unfortunately for M. Wilkie he could not articulate a syllable. His tongue was as stiff, and as dry, as if it had been paralysed. He nervously passed and repassed his fingers between his neck and his collar, but although this gave full play to his cravat, his words did not leave his throat any more readily. For he had imagined that Madame d'Argelès would be like other women he had known, but not at all. He found her to be an extremely proud and awe-inspiring creature, who, to use his own vocabulary, *squelched* him completely. "I wished to say to you," he repeated, "I wished to say to you—" But the words he was seeking would not come; and, so at last, angry with himself, he exclaimed: "Ah! you know as well as I, why I have come. Do you dare to pretend that you don't know?"

She looked at him with admirably feigned astonishment, glanced despairingly at the ceiling, shrugged her shoulders, and replied: "Most certainly I don't know—unless indeed it be a wager."

"A wager!" M. Wilkie wondered if he were not the victim of some practical joke, and if there were not a crowd of listeners hidden somewhere, who, after enjoying his discomfiture, would suddenly make their appearance, holding their sides. This fear restored his presence of mind. "Well, then," he replied, huskily, "this is my reason. I know nothing respecting my parents. This morning, a man with whom you are well acquainted, assured me that I was—your son. I was completely stunned at first, but after a while I recovered sufficiently to call here, and found that you had gone out."

He was interrupted by a nervous laugh from Madame d'Argelès. For she was heroic enough to laugh, although death was in her heart, and although the nails of her clinched hands were embedded deep in her quivering flesh. "And you believed him, monsieur?" she exclaimed. "Really this is too absurd! I—your mother! Why, look at me—"

He was doing nothing else, he was watching her with all the powers of penetration he possessed. Madame d'Argelès' laugh had an unnatural ring that awakened his suspicions. All Coralth's recommendations buzzed confusedly in his ears, and he judged that the moment had come "to do the sentimental," as he would have expressed it. So he lowered his head, and in an aggrieved tone, exclaimed: "Ah! you think it very amusing, I don't. Do you realise how wretched it makes one to live as utterly alone as a leper, without a soul to love or care for you? Other young men have a mother, sisters, relatives. I have no one! Ah! if— But I only have friends while my money lasts." He wiped his eyes, dry as they were, with his handkerchief, and in a still more pathetic tone, resumed: "Not that I want for anything; I receive a very handsome allowance. But when my relatives have given me the wherewithal to keep me from starving, they imagine their duty is fulfilled. I think this very hard. I didn't come into the world at my own request, did I? I didn't ask to be born. If I was such an annoyance to them when I came into existence, why didn't they throw me into the river? Then they would have been well rid of me, and I should be out of my misery!"

He stopped short, struck dumb with amazement, for Madame d'Argelès

had thrown herself on her knees at his feet. "Have mercy!" she faltered; "Wilkie, my son, forgive me!" Alas! the unfortunate woman had failed in playing a part which was too difficult for a mother's heart. "You have suffered cruelly, my son," she continued; "but I—I— Ah! you can't conceive the frightful agony it costs a mother to separate from her child! But you were not deserted, Wilkie; don't say that. Have you not felt my love in the air around you? *You* forgotten? Know, then, that for years and years I have seen you every day, and that all my thoughts and all my hopes are centred in you alone! Wilkie!"

She dragged herself towards him with her hands clasped in an agony of supplication, while he recoiled, frightened by this outburst of passion, and utterly amazed by his easily won victory. The poor woman misunderstood this movement. "Great God!" she exclaimed, "he spurns me; he loathes me. Ah! I knew it would be so. Oh! why did you come? What infamous wretch sent you here? Name him, Wilkie! Do you understand, now, why I concealed myself from you? I dreaded the day when I should blush before you, before my own son. And yet it was for your sake. Death would have been a rest, a welcome release for me. But your breath was ebbing away, your poor little arms no longer had strength to clasp me round the neck. And then I cried! 'Perish my soul and body, if only my child can be saved!' I believed such a sacrifice permissible in a mother. I am punished for it as if it were a crime. I thought you would be happy, my Wilkie. I said to myself that you, my pride and joy, would move freely and proudly far above me and my shame. I accepted ignominy, so that your honour might be preserved intact. I knew the horrors of abject poverty, and I wished to save my son from it. I would have licked up the very mire in your pathway to save you from a stain. I renounced all hope for myself, and I consecrated all that was noble and generous in my nature to you. Oh! I will discover the vile coward who sent you here, who betrayed my secret. I will discover him and I will have my revenge! You were never to know this, Wilkie. In parting from you, I took a solemn oath never to see you again, and to die without the supreme consolation of feeling your lips upon my forehead."

She could not continue; sobs choked her utterance. And for more than a minute the silence was so profound that one could hear the sound of low conversation in the hall outside, the exclamations of the players as they greeted each unexpected turn of luck, and occasionally a cry of "Banco!" or "I stake one hundred louis!" Standing silent and motionless near the window, Wilkie gazed with consternation at Madame d'Argelès, his mother, who was crouching in the middle of the room with her face hidden in her hands, and sobbing as if her heart would break. He would willingly have given his third share in Pompier de Nanterre to have made his escape. The strangeness of the scene appalled him. It was not emotion that he felt, but an instinctive fear mingled with commiseration. And he was not only ill at ease, but he was angry with himself for what he secretly styled his weakness. "Women are incomprehensible," he thought. "It would be so easy to explain things quietly and properly, but they must always cry and have a sort of melodrama."

Suddenly the sound of footsteps near the door roused him from his stupor. He shuddered at the thought that some one might come in. He hated the very idea of ridicule. So summoning all his courage he went towards Madame d'Argelès, and raising her from the floor, he exclaimed: "Don't cry so. You grieve me, upon my word! Pray get up. Some one is com-

ing. Do you hear me? Some one is coming." Thereupon, as she offered no resistance, he half led, half carried her to an arm-chair, into which she sank heavily. "Now she is going to faint!" thought Wilkie, in despair. What should he do? Call for help? He dared not. However, necessity inspired him. He knelt at Madame d'Argelès's feet, and gently said: "Come, come, be reasonable! Why do you give way like this? I don't reproach you!"

Slowly, with an air of humility which was indescribably touching, she took her hands from her face, and for the first time raised her tear-stained eyes to her son's. "Wilkie," she murmured.

"Madame!"

She heaved a deep sigh, and in a half-stifled voice: "*Madame!*" she repeated. "Will you not call me mother?"

"Yes, of course—certainly. But—only you know it will take me some time to acquire the habit. I shall do so, of course; but I shall have to get used to it, you know."

"True, very true!—but tell me it is not mere pity that leads you to make this promise? If you should hate me—if you should curse me—how should I bear it! Ah! when a woman reaches the years of understanding one should never cease repeating to her: 'Take care! Your son will be twenty some day, and you will have to meet his searching gaze. You will have to render an account of your honour to him!' My God! If women thought of this, they would never sin. To be reduced to such a state of abject misery that one dares not lift one's head before one's own son! Alas! Wilkie, I know only too well that you cannot help despising me."

"No, indeed. Not at all! What an idea!"

"Tell me that you forgive me!"

"I do, upon my word I do."

Poor woman, her face brightened. She so longed to believe him! And her son was beside her, so near that she felt his breath upon her cheek. It was he indeed. Had they ever been separated? She almost doubted it, she had lived so near him in thought. It was with a sort of ecstasy that she looked at him. There was a world of entreaty in her eyes; they seemed to be begging a caress; she raised her quivering lips to his, but he did not observe it. For a long time she hesitated, fearing he might spurn her; but at last, yielding to a supreme impulse, she threw her arms around his neck, drew him towards her, and pressed him to her heart in a close embrace. "My son! my son!" she repeated; "to have you with me again, after all these years!"

Unfortunately, no whirlwind of passion was capable of carrying M. Wilkie beyond himself. His emotion was now spent and his mind had regained its usual indifference. He flattered himself that he was a man of mettle—and he remained as cold as ice beneath his mother's kisses. Indeed, he barely tolerated them; and if he did allow her to embrace him, it was only because he did not know how to refuse. "Will she never have done?" he thought. "This is a pretty state of things! I must be very attractive. How Costard and Serpillon would laugh if they saw me now." Costard and Serpillon were his intimate friends, the co-proprietors of the famous steeple-chaser.

In her rapture, however, Madame d'Argèles did not observe the peculiar expression on her son's face. She had compelled him to take a chair opposite her, and, with nervous volubility, she continued: "If I don't deny myself the happiness of embracing you again, it is because I have not

broken the vow I took never to make myself known to you. When I entered this room, I was firmly resolved to convince you, no matter how, that you had been deceived. God knows that it was not my fault if I did not succeed. There are some sacrifices that are above human strength."

M. Wilkie deigned to smile. "Oh! yes, I saw your little game," he said, with a knowing air. "But I had been well posted, and besides, it is not very easy to fool me."

Madame d'Argelès did not even hear him. "Perhaps destiny is weary of afflicting us," she continued; "perhaps a new life is about to begin. Through you, Wilkie, I can again be happy. I, who for years have lived without even hope. But will you have courage to forget?"

"What?"

She hung her head, and in an almost inaudible voice replied, "The past, Wilkie."

But with an air of the greatest indifference, he snapped his fingers, and exclaimed: "Nonsense! What is past is past. Such things are soon forgotten. Paris has known many such cases. You are my mother; I care very little for public opinion. I begin by pleasing myself, and I consult other people afterwards; and when they are dissatisfied, I tell them to mind their own business."

The poor woman listened to these words with a joy bordering on rapture. One might have supposed that the strangeness of her son's expressions would have surprised her—have enlightened her in regard to his true character—but no. She only saw and understood one thing—that he had no intention of casting her off, but was indeed ready to devote himself to her. "My God!" she faltered, "is this really true? Will you allow me to remain with you? Oh, don't reply rashly! Consider well, before you promise to make such a sacrifice. Think how much sorrow and pain it will cost you."

"I have considered. It is decided—mother."

She sprang up, wild with hope and enthusiasm. "Then we are saved!" she cried. "Blessed be he who betrayed my secret! And I doubted your courage, my Wilkie! At last I can escape from this hell! This very night we will fly from this house, without one backward glance. I will never set foot in these rooms again—the detested gamblers who are sitting here shall never see me again. From this moment Lia d'Argelès is dead."

M. Wilkie positively felt like a man who had just fallen from the clouds. "What, fly?" he stammered. "Where shall we go then?"

"To a country where we are unknown, Wilkie—to a land where you will not have to blush for your mother."

"But—"

"Trust yourself to me, my son. I know a pleasant village near London where we can find a refuge. My connections in England are such that you need not fear the obstacles one generally meets with among foreigners. M. Patterson, who manages a large manufacturing establishment, will, I know, be happy to be of service to us—but we shall not be indebted to any one for long, now that you have resolved to work."

On hearing these words, M. Wilkie sprang up in dismay. "Excuse me," he said, "I don't understand you. You propose to set me to work in M. Patterson's factory? Well, to tell the truth, that doesn't suit me at all."

It was impossible to mistake M. Wilkie's manner, his tone, or gesture. They revealed him in his true character. Madame d'Argelès saw her terrible mistake at once. The bandage fell from her eyes. She had taken her dreams for realities, and the desires of her own heart for those of her

son. She rose, trembling with sorrow and with indignation. "Wilkie!" she exclaimed, "Wilkie, wretched boy! what did you dare to hope?"

And, without giving him time to reply, she continued: "Then it was only idle curiosity that brought you here. You wished to know the source of the money which you spend like water. Very well, you may see for yourself. This is a gambling house; one of those establishments frequented by distinguished personages, which the police ignore, or which they cannot suppress. The hubbub you hear is made by the players. Men are ruined here. Some poor wretches have blown their brains out on leaving the house; others have parted with the last vestige of honour here. And the business pays me well. One louis out of every hundred that change hands falls to my share. This is the source of your wealth, my son."

This anger, which succeeded such deep grief—this outburst of disdain, following such abject humility—considerably astonished M. Wilkie. "Allow me to ask—" he began.

But he was not allowed a hearing. "Fool!" continued Madame d'Argelès, "did nothing warn you that in coming here you would deprive yourself forever of the income you received? Did no inward voice tell you that all would be changed when you compelled me, Lia d'Argelès, to say, 'Well, yes, it is true; you are my son?' So long as you did not know who and what I was, I had a mother's right to watch over you. I could help you without disgracing you, without despising you. But now that you know me, and know what I am, I can do nothing more for you—nothing! I would rather let you starve than succour you, for I would rather see you dead than dishonoured by my money."

"But—"

"What! would you still consent to receive the allowance I have made you, even if I consented to continue it?"

Had a viper raised its head in M. Wilkie's path he would not have recoiled more quickly. "Never!" he exclaimed. "Ah, no! What do you take me for?"

This repugnance was sincere; there could be no doubt of that, and it seemed to give Madame d'Argelès a ray of hope. "I have misjudged him," she thought. "Poor Wilkie! Evil advice has led him astray; but he is not bad at heart. In that case, my poor child," she said aloud, "you must see that a new life is about to commence for you. What do you intend to do? How will you gain a livelihood? People must have food, and clothes, and a roof to shelter them. These things cost money. And where will you obtain it—you who rebel at the very word work? Ah! if I had only listened to M. Patterson. He was not blind like myself. He was always telling me that I was spoiling you, and ruining your future by giving you so much money. Do you know that you have spent more than fifty thousand francs during the past two years? How have you squandered them? Have you been to the law-school a dozen times? No. But you can be seen at the races, at the opera, in the fashionable restaurants, and at every place of amusement where a young man can squander money. And who are your associates? Dissipated and heartless idlers, grooms, gamblers, and abandoned women."

A sneer from M. Wilkie interrupted her. To think that any one should dare to attack his friends, his tastes, and his pleasures. Such a thing was not to be tolerated. "This is astonishing—astonishing, upon my word!" said he. "You moralizing! that's really too good! I should like a few minutes to laugh; it is too ridiculous!"

Was he really conscious of the cruelty of his ironical words? The blow was so terrible that Madame d'Argelès staggered beneath it. She was prepared for anything and everything except this insult from her son. Still, she accepted it without rebellion, although it was in a tone of heart-broken anguish that she replied: "Perhaps I have no right to tell you the truth. I hope the future will prove that I am wrong. However, you are without resources, and you have no profession. Pray Heaven that you may never know what it is to be hungry and to have no bread."

For some time already the ingenious young man had shown unmistakeable signs of impatience. This gloomy prediction irritated him beyond endurance.

"All this is empty talk," he interrupted. "I don't mean to work, for it's not at all in my line. Still, I don't expect to want for anything! That's plain enough, I hope."

Madame d'Argelès did not wince. "What do you mean to do then?" she asked, coldly. "I don't understand you."

He shrugged his shoulders impatiently. "Are we to keep up this farce for ever?" he petulantly exclaimed. "It doesn't take with me. You know what I mean as well as I do. Why do you talk to me about dying of starvation? What about the fortune?"

"What fortune?"

"Eh? why, my uncle's, of course! Your brother's, the Count de Chalusse."

Now M. Wilkie's visit, manner, assurance, wheedling, and contradictions were all explained. That maternal confidence which is so strong in the hearts of mothers vanished from Madame d'Argelès' for ever. The depths of selfishness and cunning she discerned in Wilkie's mind appalled her. She now understood why he had declared himself ready to brave public opinion—why he had proved willing to accept his share of the past ignominy. It was not his mother's, but the Count de Chalusse's estate that he claimed. "Ah! so you've heard of that," she said, in a tone of bitter irony. And then, remembering M. Isidore Fortunat, she asked: "Some one has sold you this valuable secret. How much have you promised to pay him in case of success?"

Although Wilkie prided himself on being very clever, he did not pretend to be a diplomatist, and, indeed, he was greatly disconcerted by this question; still, recovering himself, he replied: "It doesn't matter how I obtained the information—whether I paid for it, or whether it cost me nothing—but I know that you are a Chalusse, and that you are the heiress of the count's property, which is valued at eight or ten millions of francs. Do you deny it?"

Madame d'Argelès sadly shook her head. "I deny nothing," she replied, "but I am about to tell you something which will destroy all your plans and extinguish your hopes. I am resolved, understand, and my resolution is irrevocable, never to assert my rights. To receive this fortune, I should be obliged to confess that Lia d'Argelès is a Chalusse—and that is a confession which no consideration whatever will wring from me."

She imagined that this declaration would silence and discomfit Wilkie, but she was mistaken. If he had been obliged to depend upon himself he would perhaps have been conquered by it; but he was armed with weapons which had been furnished by the cunning viscount. So he shrugged his shoulders, and coolly replied: "In that case we should remain poor, and the government would take possession of our millions. One moment. I

have something to say in this matter. You may renounce your claim, but I shall not renounce mine. I am your son, and I shall claim th property."

"Even if I entreated you on my knees not to do so?"

"Yes."

Madame d'Argelès' eyes flashed. "Very well. I will show you that this estate can never be yours. By what right will you lay claim to it? Because you are my son? But I will deny that you are. I will declare upon oath that you are nothing to me, and that I don't even know you."

But even this did not daunt Wilkie. He drew from his pocket a scrap of paper, and flourishing it triumphantly, he exclaimed: "It would be extremely cruel on your part to deny me, but I foresaw such a contingency, and here is my answer, copied from the civil code: 'Article 341. Inquiry as to maternity allowed, &c., &c.'"

What the exact bearing of Wilkie's threat might be Madame d'Argelès did not know. But she felt that this Article 341 would no doubt destroy her last hope; for the person who had chosen this weapon from the code to place it in Wilkie's hand must have chosen it carefully. She understood the situation perfectly. With her experience of life, she could not fail to understand the despicable part Wilkie was playing. And though it was not her son who had conceived this odious plot, it was more than enough to know that he had consented to carry it into execution. Should she try to persuade Wilkie to abandon this shameful scheme? She might have done so if she had not been so horrified by the utter want of principle which she had discovered in his character. But, under the circumstances, she realised that any effort in this direction would prove unavailing. So it was purely from a sense of duty and to prevent her conscience from reproaching her that she exclaimed: "So you will apply to the courts in order to constrain me to acknowledge you as my son?"

"If you are not reasonable—"

"That is to say, you care nothing for the scandal that will be created by such a course. In order to prove yourself a member of the Chalusse family you will begin by disgracing the name and dragging it through the mire."

Wilkie had no wish to prolong this discussion. So much talk about an affair, which, in his opinion, at least, was an extremely simple one, seemed to him utterly ridiculous, and irritated him beyond endurance. "It strikes me this is much ado about nothing," he remarked. "One would suppose, to hear you talk, that you were the greatest criminal in the world. Goodness is all very well in its way, but there is such a thing as having too much of it! Break loose from this life to-morrow, assume your rightful name, install yourself at the Hôtel de Chalusse, and in a week from now no one will remember that you were once known as Lia d'Argelès. I wager one hundred louis on it. Why, if people attempted to rake up the past life of their acquaintances, they should have far too much to do. Folks do not trouble themselves as to whether a person has done this or that; the essential thing is to have plenty of money. And if any fool speaks slightingly of you, you can reply: 'I have an income of five hundred thousand francs,' and he'll say no more."

Madame Argelès listened, speechless with horror and disgust. Was it really her son who was speaking in this style, and to her of all people in the world? M. Wilkie misunderstood her silence. He had an excellent opinion of himself, but he was rather surprised at the effect of his eloquence. "Besides, I'm tired of vegetating, and having only one name," he continued. "I want to be on the move. Even with the small allow-

ance I've had, I have gained a very good position in society; and if I had plenty of money I should be the most stylish man in Paris. The count's estate belongs to me, and so I must have it—in fact, I will have it. So believe me when I tell you that it will be much better for you if you acknowledge me without any fuss! Now, will you do so? No? Once, twice, three times? Is it still no? Very well then; to-morrow, then, you may expect an official notice. I wish you good-evening."

He bowed; he was really going, for his hand was already on the door-knob. But Madame d'Argelès detained him with a gesture. "One word more," she said, in a voice hoarse with emotion.

He scarcely deigned to come back, and he made no attempt to conceal his impatience. "Well, what is it?" he asked, hastily.

"I wish to give you a bit of parting advice. The court will undoubtedly decide in your favour; I shall be placed in possession of my brother's estate; but neither you nor I will have the disposal of these millions."

"Why?"

"Because, though this fortune belongs to me, the control of it belongs to your father."

M. Wilkie was thunderstruck. "To my father?" he exclaimed. "Impossible!"

"It is so, however; and you would not have been ignorant of the fact, if your greed for money had not made you forget to question me. You believe yourself an illegitimate child. Wilkie, you are mistaken. You are my legitimate child. I am a married woman—"

"Bah!"

"And my husband—your father—is not dead. If he is not here now, threatening our safety, it is because I have succeeded in eluding him. He lost all trace of us eighteen years ago. Since then he has been constantly striving to discover us, but in vain. He is still watching, you may be sure of that; and as soon as there is any talk of a law-suit respecting the Chalusse property, you will see him appear, armed with his rights. He is the head of the family—your master and mine. Ah! this seems to disturb you. You will find him full of insatiable greed for wealth, a greed which has been whetted by twenty years' waiting. You may yet see the day when you will regret the paltry twenty thousand francs a year formerly given you by your poor mother."

Wilkie's face was whiter than his shirt. "You are deceiving me," he stammered.

"To-morrow I will shew you my marriage certificate."

"Why not this evening?"

"Because it is locked up in a room which is now full of people."

"And what was my father's name?"

"Arthur Gordon—he is an American."

"Then my name is Wilkie Gordon?"

"Yes."

"And—is my father rich?" he inquired.

"No."

"What does he do?"

"Everything that a man can do when he has a taste for luxury and a horror for work."

This reply was so explicit in its brevity, and implied so many terrible accusations, that Wilkie was dismayed. "The devil!" he exclaimed, "and where does he live?"

"He lives at Baden or Homburg in the summer; in Paris or at Monaco in the winter."

"Oh! oh! oh!" ejaculated Wilkie, in three different tones. He knew what he had to expect from such a father as that. Anger now followed stupor—one of those terrible, white rages which stir the bile and not the blood. He saw his hopes and his cherished visions fade. Luxury and notoriety, high-stepping horses, yellow-haired mistresses, all vanished. He pictured himself reduced to a mere pittance, and held in check and domineered over by a brutal father. "Ah! I understand your game," he hissed through his set teeth. "If you would only quietly assert your rights, everything could be arranged privately, and I should have time to put the property out of my father's reach before he could claim it. Instead of doing that—as you hate me—you compel me to make the affair public, so that my father will hear of it and defraud me of everything. But you won't play this trick on me. You are going to write at once, and make known your claim to your brother's estate."

"No."

"Ah! you won't? You refuse—" He approached threateningly, and caught hold of her arm. "Take care!" he vociferated; "take care! Do not infuriate me beyond endurance—"

As cold and rigid as marble, Madame d'Argelès faced him with the undaunted glance of a martyr whose spirit no violence can subdue. "You will obtain nothing from me," she said, firmly; "nothing, nothing, nothing!"

Maddened with rage and disappointment, M. Wilkie dared to lift his hand as if about to strike her. But at this moment the door was flung open, and a man sprang upon him. It was Baron Trigault.

Like the other guests, the baron had seen the terrible effect produced upon Madame d'Argelès by a simple visiting card. But he had this advantage over the others: he thought he could divine and explain the reason of this sudden, seemingly incomprehensible terror. "The poor woman has been betrayed," he thought; "her son is here!" Still, while the other players crowded around their hostess, he did not leave the card table. He was sitting opposite M. de Coralth, aud he had seen the dashing viscount start and change colour. His suspicions were instantly aroused, and he wished to verify them. He therefore pretended to be more than ever absorbed in the cards, and swore lustily at the deserters who had broken up the game. "Come back, gentlemen, come back," he cried, angrily. "We are wasting precious time. While you have been trifling there, I might have gained—or lost—a hundred louis."

He was nevertheless greatly alarmed, and the prolonged absence of Madame d'Argelès increased his fears each moment. At the end of an hour he could restrain himself no longer. So taking advantage of a heavy loss, he rose from the table, swearing that the beastly turmoil of a few moments before had changed the luck. Then passing into the adjoining drawing-room, he managed to make his escape unobserved. "Where is madame?" he inquired of the first servant he met.

"In the little sitting-room."

"Alone?"

"No; a young gentleman is with her."

The baron no longer doubted the correctness of his conjectures, and his disquietude increased. Quickly, and as if he had been in his own house, he hastened to the door of the little sitting-room and listened. At that moment rage was imparting a truly frightful intonation to M. Wilkie's voice.

The baron really felt alarmed. He stooped, applied his eye to the key-hole, and seeing M. Wilkie with his hand uplifted, he burst open the door and went in. He arrived only just in time to fell Wilkie to the floor, and save Madame d Argelès from that most terrible of humiliations: the degradation of being struck by her own son. "Ah, you rascal!" cried the worthy baron, transported with indignation, "you beggarly rascal! you brigand! Is this the way you treat an unfortunate woman who has sacrificed herself for you? your mother? You try to strike your mother, when you ought to kiss her very footprints!"

As livid as if his blood had been suddenly turned to gall—with quivering lips and eyes starting from their sockets—M. Wilkie rose, with difficulty, to his feet, at the same time rubbing his left elbow which had struck against the corner of a piece of furniture, in his fall. "Scoundrel! You brutal scoundrel!" he growled, ferociously. And then, retreating a step: "Who gave you permission to come in here?" he added. "Who are you? By what right do you meddle with my affairs?"

"By the right that every honest man possesses to chastise a cowardly rascal."

M. Wilkie shook his fist at the baron. "You are a coward yourself," he retorted. "You had better learn who you are talking to! You must mend your manners a little, you old—"

The word he uttered was so vile that no man could fail to resent it, much less the baron, who was already frantic with passion. His faced turned as purple as if he were stricken with apoplexy, and such furious rage gleamed in his eyes that Madame d'Argelès was frightened. She feared she should see her son butchered before her very eyes, and she extended her arms as if to protect him. "Jacques," she said beseechingly, "Jacques!"

This was the name which was idelibly impressed upon Wilkie's memory —the name he had heard when he was but a child. Jacques—that was the name of the man who had brought him cakes and toys in the comfortable rooms where he had remained only a few days. He understood, or at least he thought he understood, everything. "Ah ha!" he exclaimed, with a laugh that was at once both ferocious and idiotic. "This is very fine—monsieur is the lover. He has the say here—he—"

He did not have time to finish his sentence, for quick as thought the baron caught him by the collar, lifted him from the ground with irresistible strength, and flung him on his knees at Madame d'Argelès' feet, exclaiming: "Ask her pardon, you vile wretch! Ask her pardon or—" "Or" meant the baron's clinched fist descending like a sledge-hammer on M. Wilkie's head.

The worthy youth was frightened—so terribly frightened that his teeth chattered. "Pardon!" he faltered.

"Louder—speak up better than that. Your mother must answer you!"

Alas! the poor woman could no longer hear. She had endured so much during the past hour that her strength was exhausted, and she had fallen back in her arm-chair in a deep swoon. The baron waited for a moment, and seeing that her eyes remained obstinately closed, he exclaimed: "This is your work, wretch!"

And lifting him again, as easily as if he had been a child, he set him on his feet, saying in a calmer tone, but in one that admitted of no reply: "Arrange your clothes and go."

This advice was not unnecessary. Baron Trigault had a powerful hand; and M. Wilkie's attire was decidedly the worse for the encounter. He had

lost his cravat, his shirt-front was crumpled and torn, and his waistcoat—one of those that open to the waist and are fastened by a single button—hung down in the most dejected manner. He obeyed the baron's order without a word, but not without considerable difficulty, for his hands trembled like a leaf. When he had finished, the baron exclaimed: "Now be off; and never set foot here again—understand me—never set foot here again, never!"

M. Wilkie made no reply until he reached the door leading into the hall. But when he had opened it, he suddenly regained his powers of speech. "I'm not afraid of you," he cried, with frantic violence. "You have taken advantage of your superior strength—you are a coward. But this shall not end here. No!—you shall answer for it. I shall find your address, and to-morrow you will receive a visit from my friends M. Costard and M. Serpillon. I am the insulted party—and I choose swords!"

A frightful oath from the baron somewhat hastened M. Wilkie's exit. He went out into the hall, and holding the door open, in a way that would enable him to close it at the shortest notice, he shouted back, so as to be heard by all the servants: "Yes; I will have satisfaction. I will not stand such treatment. Is it any fault of mine that Madame d'Argelès is a Chalusse, and that she wishes to defraud me of my fortune. To-morrow, I call you all to witness, there will be a lawyer here. You don't frighten me. Here is my card!" And actually, before he closed the door, he threw one of his cards into the middle of the room.

The baron did not trouble himself to pick it up; his attention was devoted to Madame d'Argelès. She was lying back in her arm-chair, white, motionless and rigid, to all appearance dead. What should the baron do? He did not wish to call the servants; they had heard too much already—but he had almost decided to do so, when his eyes fell upon a tiny aquarium, in a corner of the room. He dipped his handkerchief in it; and alternately bathed Madame d'Argelès' temples and chafed her hands. It was not long before the cold water revived her. She trembled, a convulsive shudder shook her from head to foot, and at last she opened her eyes, murmuring: "Wilkie!"

"I have sent him away," replied the baron.

Poor woman! with returning life came the consciousness of the terrible reality. "He is my son!" she moaned, "my son, my Wilkie!" Then with a despairing gesture she pressed her hands to her forehead as if to calm its throbbings. "And I believed that my sin was expiated," she pursued. "I thought I had been sufficiently punished. Fool that I was! This is my chastisement, Jacques. Ah! women like me have no right to be mothers!"

A burning tear coursed down the baron's cheek; but he concealed his emotion as well as he could, and said, in a tone of assumed gaiety: "Nonsense! Wilkie is young—he will mend his ways! We were all ridiculous when we were twenty. We have all caused our mothers many anxious nights. Time will set everything to rights, and put some ballast in this young madcap's brains. Besides, your friend Patterson doesn't seem to me quite free from blame. In knowledge of books, he may have been unequalled; but as a guardian for youth, he must have been the worst of fools. After keeping your son on a short allowance for years, he suddenly gorges him with oats—or I should say, money—lets him loose; and then seems surprised because the boy is guilty of acts of folly. It would be a miracle if he were not. So take courage, and hope for the best, my dear Lia."

She shook her head despondently. "Do you suppose that my heart hasn't pleaded for him?" she said. "I am his mother; I can never cease to love him, whatever he may do. Even now I am ready to give a drop of blood for each tear I can save him. But I am not blind; I have read his nature. Wilkie has no heart."

"Ah! my dear friend, how do you know what shameful advice he may have received before coming to you?"

Madame d'Argelès half rose, and said, in an agitated voice: "What! you try to make me believe that? 'Advice!' Then he must have found a man who said to him: 'Go to the house of this unfortunate woman who gave you birth, and order her to publish her dishonour and yours. If she refuses, insult and beat her!' You know, even better than I, baron, that this is impossible. In the vilest natures, and when every other honourable feeling has been lost, love for one's mother survives. Even convicts deprive themselves of their wine, and sell their rations, in order to send a trifle now and then to their mothers—while he—"

She paused, not because she shrunk from what she was about to say, but because she was exhausted and out of breath. She rested for a moment, and then resumed in a calmer tone: "Besides, the person who sent him here had counselled coolness and prudence. I discovered this at once. It was only towards the close of the interview, and after an unexpected revelation from me, that he lost all control over himself. The thought that he would lose my brother's millions crazed him. Oh! that fatal and accursed money! Wilkie's adviser wished him to employ legal means to obtain an acknowledgment of his parentage; and he had copied from the Code a clause which is applicable to this case. By this one circumstance I am convinced that his adviser is a man of experience in such matters—in other words, the business agent—"

"What business agent?" inquired the baron.

"The person who called here the other day, M. Isidore Fortunat. Ah! why didn't I not bribe him to hold his peace?"

The baron had entirely forgotten the existence of Victor Chupin's honourable employer. "You are mistaken, Lia," he replied. "M. Fortunat has had no hand in this."

"Then who could have betrayed my secret?"

"Why, your former ally, the rascal for whose sake you allowed Pascal Ferailleur to be sacrificed—the Viscount de Coralth!"

The bare supposition of such treachery on the viscount's part brought a flush of indignant anger to Madame d'Argelès' cheek. "Ah! If I thought that!" she exclaimed. And then, remembering what reasons the baron had for hating M. de Coralth, she murmured: "No! Your animosity misleads you—he wouldn't dare!"

The baron read her thoughts. "So you are persuaded that it is personal vengeance that I am pursuing?" said he. "You think that fear of ridicule and public odium prevents me from striking M. de Coralth in my own name, and that I am endeavouring to find some other excuse to crush him. This might have been so once; but it is not the case now. When I promised M. Ferailleur to do all in my power to save the young girl he loves, Mademoiselle Marguerite, my wife's daughter, I renounced all thought of self, all my former plans. And why should you doubt Coralth's treachery? You, yourself, promised me to unmask *him*. If he has betrayed *you*, my poor Lia, he has only been a little in advance of you."

She hung her head and made no reply. She had forgotten this.

"Besides," continued the baron, "you ought to know that when I make such a statement I have some better foundation for it than mere conjecture. It was to some purpose that I watched M. de Coralth during your absence. When the servant handed you that card he turned extremely pale. Why? Because he knew whose card it was. After you left the room his hands trembled like leaves, and his mind was no longer occupied with the game. He —who is usually such a cautious player—risked his money recklessly. When the cards came to him he did still worse; and though luck favoured him, he made the strangest blunders, and lost. His agitation and preoccupation were so marked as to attract attention: and one acquaintance laughingly inquired if he were ill, while another jestingly remarked that he had dined and wined a little too much. The traitor was evidently on coals of fire. I could see the perspiration on his forehead, and each time the door opened or shut, he changed colour, as if he expected to see you and Wilkie enter. A dozen times I surprised him listening eagerly, as if by dint of attention, or by the magnetic force of his will, he hoped to hear what you and your son were saying. With a single word I could have wrung a confession from him."

This explanation was so plausible that Madame d'Argelès felt half convinced. "Ah! if you had only spoken that word!" she murmured. The baron smiled a crafty and malicious smile, which would have chilled M. de Coralth's very blood if he had chanced to see it. "I am not so stupid!" he replied. "We mustn't frighten the fish till we are quite ready. Our net is the Chalusse estate, and Coralth and Valorsay will enter it of their own accord. It is not my plan, but M. Ferailleur's. There's a man for you! and if Mademoiselle Marguerite is worthy of him they will make a noble pair. Without suspecting it, your son has perhaps rendered us an important service this evening—"

"Alas!" faltered Madame d'Argelès, "I am none the less ruined—the name of Chalusse is none the less dishonoured!"

She wanted to return to the drawing-room; but she was compelled to relinquish this idea. The expression of her face betrayed too plainly the terrible ordeal she had passed through. The servants had heard M. Wilkie's parting words; and news of this sort flies about with the rapidity of lightning. That very night, indeed, it was currently reported at the clubs that there would be no more card-playing at the D'Argelès establishment, as that lady was a Chalusse, and consequently the aunt of the beautiful young girl whom M. and Madame de Fondège had taken under their protection.

VIII.

Unusual strength of character, unbounded confidence in one's own energy, with thorough contempt of danger, and an invincible determination to triumph or perish, are all required of the person who, like Mademoiselle Marguerite, intrusts herself to the care of strangers—worse yet, to the care of actual enemies. It is no small matter to place yourself in the power of smooth-tongued hypocrites and impostors, who are anxious for your ruin, and whom you know to be capable of anything. And the task is a mighty one—to brave unknown dangers, perilous seductions, perfidious counsels, and perhaps even violence, at the same time retaining a calm eye and smiling lips. Yet such was the heroism that Marguerite, although scarcely twenty, displayed when she left the Hôtel de Chalusse to accept the

hospitality of the Fondège family. And, to crown all, she took Madame Léon with her—Madame Léon, whom she knew to be the Marquis de Valorsay's spy.

But, brave as she was, when the moment of departure came her heart almost failed her. There was despair in the parting glance she cast upon the princely mansion and the familiar faces of the servants. And there was no one to encourage or sustain her. Ah, yes! standing at a window on the second floor, with his forehead pressed close against the pane of glass, she saw the only friend she had in the world—the old magistrate who had defended, encouraged, and sustained her—the man who had promised her his assistance and advice, and prophesied ultimate success.

"Shall I be a coward?" she thought; "shall I be unworthy of Pascal?" And she resolutely entered the carriage, mentally exclaiming: "The die is cast!"

The General insisted that she should take a place beside Madame de Fondège on the back seat; whilst he found a place next to Madame Léon on the seat facing them. The drive was a silent and tedious one. The night was coming on; it was a time when all Paris was on the move, and the carriage was delayed at each street corner by a crowd of passing vehicles. The conversation was solely kept alive by the exertions of Madame de Fondège, whose shrill voice rose above the rumble of the wheels, as she chronicled the virtues of the late Count de Chalusse, and congratulated Mademoiselle Marguerite on the wisdom of her decision. Her remarks were of a commonplace description, and yet each word she uttered evinced intense satisfaction, almost delight, as if she had won some unexpected victory. Occasionally, the General leaned from the carriage window to see if the vehicle laden with Mademoiselle Marguerite's trunks was following them, but he said nothing.

At last they reached his residence in the Rue Pigalle. He alighted first, offered his hand successively to his wife, Mademoiselle Marguerite, and Madame Léon, and motioned the coachman to drive away.

But the man did not stir. "Pardon—excuse me, monsieur," he said, "but my employers bade—requested me—"

"What?"

"To ask you—you know, for the fare—thirty-five francs—not counting the little gratuity."

"Very well!—I will pay you to-morrow."

"Excuse me, monsieur; but if it is all the same to you, would you do so this evening? My employer said that the bill had been standing a long time already."

"What, scoundrel!"

But Madame de Fondège, who was on the point of entering the house, suddenly stepped back, and drawing out her pocket-book exclaimed: "That's enough! Here are thirty-five francs."

The man went to his carriage lamp to count the money, and seeing that he had the exact amount—"And my gratuity?" he asked.

"I give none to insolent people," replied the General.

"You should take a cab if you haven't money enough to pay for coaches," replied the driver with an oath. "I'll be even with you yet."

Marguerite heard no more, for Madame de Fondège caught her by the arm and hurried her up the staircase, saying: "Quick! we must make haste. Your baggage is here already, and we must see if the rooms I intended for you—for you and your companion—suit you."

When Marguerite reached the second floor, Madame de Fondège hunted in her pocket for her latch-key. Not finding it, she rang. A tall man-servant of impudent appearance and arrayed in a glaring livery opened the door, carrying an old battered iron candlestick, in which a tiny scrap of candle was glaring and flickering. "What!" exclaimed Madame de Fondège, "the reception room not lighted yet? This is scandalous! What have you been doing in my absence? Come, make haste. Light the lamp. Tell the cook that I have some guests to dine with me. Call my maid. See that M. Gustave's room is in order. Go down and see if the General doesn't need your assistance about the baggage."

Finding it difficult to choose between so many contradictory orders, the servant did not choose at all. He placed his rusty candlestick on one of the side-tables in the reception-room, and gravely, without saying a single word, went out into the passage leading to the kitchen. "Evariste!" cried Madame de Fondège, crimson with anger, "Evariste, you insolent fellow!"

As he deigned no reply, she rushed out in pursuit of him. And soon the sound of a violent altercation arose; the servant lavishing insults upon his mistress, and she unable to find any response, save, "I dismiss you; you are an insolent scamp—I dismiss you."

Madame Léon, who was standing near Mademoiselle Marguerite in the reception-room, seemed greatly amused. "This is a strange household," said she. "A fine beginning, upon my word."

But the worthy housekeeper was the last person on earth to whom Mademoiselle Marguerite wished to reveal her thoughts. "Hush, Léon," she replied. "We are the cause of all this disturbance, and I am very sorry for it."

The retort that rose to the housekeeper's lips was checked by the return of Madame de Fondège, followed by a servant-girl with a turn up nose, a pert manner, and who carried a lighted candle in her hand.

"How can I apologize, madame," began Mademoiselle Marguerite, "for all the trouble I am giving you?"

"Ah! my dear child, I've never been so happy. Come, come, and see your room." And while they crossed several scantily-furnished apartments, Madame de Fondège continued: "It is I who ought to apologize to you. I fear you will pine for the splendours of the Hôtel de Chalusse. We are not millionaires like your poor father. We have only a modest competence, no more. But here we are!"

The maid had opened a door, and Mademoiselle Marguerite entered a good-sized room lighted by two windows, hung with soiled wall paper, and adorned with chintz curtains, from which the sun had extracted most of the colouring. Everything was in disorder here, and, in fact, the whole room was extremely dirty. The bed was not made, the washstand was dirty, some woollen stockings were hanging over the side of the rumpled bed, and on the mantel-shelf stood an ancient clock, an empty beer bottle, and some glasses. On the floor, on the furniture, in the corners, everywhere in fact, stumps of cigars were scattered in profusion, as if they had positively rained down.

"What!" gasped Madame de Fondège, "you haven't put this room in order, Justine?"

"Indeed, madame, I haven't had time."

"But it's more than a month since M. Gustave slept here?"

"I know it; but madame must remember that I have been very much

hurried this last month, having to do all the washing and ironing since the laundress—"

"That's sufficient," interrupted Madame de Fondège. And turning to Marguerite, she said: "You will, I am sure, excuse this disorder, my dear child. By this time to-morrow the room shall be transformed into one of those dainty nests of muslin and flowers which young girls delight in."

Connected with this apartment, which was known to the household as the lieutenant's room, there was a much smaller chamber lighted only by a single window, and originally intended for a dressing-room. It had two doors, one of them communicating with Marguerite's room, and the other with the passage; and it was now offered to Madame Léon, who on comparing these quarters with the spacious *suite* of rooms she had occupied at the Hôtel de Chalusse, had considerable difficulty in repressing a grimace. Still she did not hesitate nor even murmur. M. de Valorsay's orders bound her to Marguerite, and she deemed it fortunate that she was allowed to follow her. And whether the marquis succeeded or not, he had promised her a sufficiently liberal reward to compensate for all personal discomfort. So, in the sweetest of voices, and with a feigned humility of manner, she declared this little room to be even much too good for a poor widow whose misfortunes had compelled her to abdicate her position in society.

The attentions which M. and Madame de Fondège shewed her contributed not a little to her resignation. Without knowing exactly what the General and his wife expected from Mademoiselle Marguerite, she was shrewd enough to divine that they hoped to gain some important advantage. Now her "dear child" had declared her to be a trusted friend, who was indispensable to her existence and comfort. "So these people will pay assiduous court to me," she thought. And being quite ready to play a double part as the spy of the Marquis de Valorsay, and the Fondège family, and quite willing to espouse the latter's cause should that prove to be the more remunerative course, she saw a long series of polite attentions and gifts before her.

That very evening her prophecies were realized; and she received a proof of consideration which positively delighted her. It was decided that she should take her meals at the family table, a thing which had never happened at the Hôtel de Chalusse. Mademoiselle Marguerite raised a few objections, which Madame Léon answered with a venomous look, but Madame de Fondège insisted upon the arrangement, not understanding, she said, graciously, why they need deprive themselves of the society of such an agreeable and distinguished person. Madame Léon in no wise doubted but this favour was due to her merit alone, but Mademoiselle Marguerite, who was more discerning, saw that their hostess was really furious at the idea, but was compelled to submit to it by the imperious necessity of preventing Madame Léon from coming in contact with the servants, who might make some decidedly compromising disclosures. For there were evidently many little mysteries and make-shifts to be concealed in this household. For instance, while the servants were carrying the luggage upstairs, Marguerite discovered Madame de Fondège and her maid in close consultation, whispering with that volubility which betrays an unexpected and pressing perplexity. What were they talking about? She listened without any compunctions of conscience, and the words "a pair of sheets," repeated again and again, furnished her with abundant food for reflection. "Is it possible," she thought, "that they have no sheets to give us?"

It did not take her long to discover the maid's opinion of the establish-

ment in which she served; for while she brandished her broom and duster, this girl, exasperated undoubtedly by the increase of work she saw in store for her, growled and cursed the old barrack where one was worked to death, where one never had enough to eat, and where the wages were always in arrear. Mademoiselle Marguerite was doing her best to aid the maid, who was greatly surprised to find this handsome queenly young lady so obliging, when Evariste, the same who had received warning an hour before, made his appearance, and announced in an insolent tone that "Madame la Comtesse was served."

For Madame de Fondège exacted this title. She had improvised it, as her husband had improvised his title of General, and without much more difficulty. By a search in the family archives she had discovered—so she declared to her intimate friends—that she was the descendant of a noble family, and that one of her ancestors had held a most important position at the court of Francis I. or of Louis XII. Indeed, she sometimes confounded them. However, people who had not known her father, the wood merchant, saw nothing impossible in the statements.

Evariste was dressed as a butler should be dressed when he announces dinner to a person of rank. In the daytime when he discharged the duties of footman, he was gorgeous in gold lace; but in the evening, he arrayed himself in severe black, such as is appropriate to the butler of an aristocratic household. Immediately after his announcement everybody repaired to the sumptuous dining-room which, with its huge sideboards, loaded with silver and rare china, looked not unlike a museum. Such was the display, indeed, that when Mademoiselle Marguerite took a seat at the table, between the General and his wife, and opposite Madame Léon, she asked herself if she had not been the victim of that dangerous optical delusion known as prejudice. She noticed that the supply of knives and forks was rather scanty; but many economical housewives keep most of their silver under lock and key; besides the china was very handsome and marked with the General's monogram, surmounted by his wife's coronet.

However, the dinner was badly cooked and poorly served. One might have supposed it to be a scullery maid's first attempt. Still the General devoured it with delight. He partook ravenously of every dish, a flush rose to his cheeks, and an expression of profound satisfaction was visible upon his countenance. "From this," thought Mademoiselle Marguerite, "I must infer that he usually goes hungry, and that this seems a positive feast to him." In fact, he seemed bubbling over with contentment. He twirled his moustaches á la Victor Emmanuel, and rolled his "r," as he said, "*Sacr-r-r-r-r-e bleu!*" even more ferociously than usual. It was only by a powerful effort that he restrained himself from indulging in various witticisms which would have been most unseemly in the presence of a poor girl who had just lost her father and all her hopes of fortune. But he did forget himself so much as to say that the drive to the cemetery had whetted his appetite, and to address his wife as Madame Range-à-bord, a title which had been bestowed upon her by a sailor brother.

Crimson with anger to the very roots of her coarse, sandy hair—amazed to see her husband deport himself in this style, and almost suffocated by the necessity of restraining her wrath, Madame de Fondège was heroic enough to smile, though her eyes flashed ominously. But the General was not at all dismayed. On the contrary, he cared so little for his wife's displeasure that, when the dessert was served, he turned to the servant, and,

with a wink that Mademoiselle Marguerite noticed, "Evariste," he ordered, "go to the wine-cellar, and bring me a bottle of old Bordeaux."

The valet, who had just received a week's notice, was only too glad of an opportunity for revenge. So with a malicious smile, and in a drawling tone, he replied: "Then monsieur must give me the money. Monsieur knows very well that neither the grocer nor the wine merchant will trust him any longer."

M. de Fondège rose from the table, looking very pale; but before he had time to utter a word, his wife came to the rescue. "You know, my dear, that I don't trust the key of my cellar to this lad. Evariste, call Justine."

The pert-looking chambermaid appeared, and her mistress told her where she would find the key of the famous cellar. About a quarter of an hour afterwards, one of those bottles which grocers and wine merchants prepare for the benefit of credulous customers was brought in—a bottle duly covered with dust and mould to give it a venerable appearance, and festooned with cobwebs, such as the urchins of Paris collect and sell at from fifteen sous to two francs a pound, according to quality. But the Bordeaux did not restore the General's equanimity. He was silent and subdued; and his relief was evident when, after the coffee had been served, his wife exclaimed: "We won't keep you from your club, my dear. I want a chat with our dear child."

Since she dismissed the General so unceremoniously, Madame de Fondège evidently wished for a *tête-à-tête* with Mademoiselle Marguerite. At least Madame Léon thought so, or feigned to think so, and addressing the young girl, she said: "I shall be obliged to leave you for a couple of hours, my dear young lady. My relatives would never forgive me if I did not inform them of my change of residence."

This was the first time since she had been engaged by the Count de Chalusse, that the estimable "companion" had ever made any direct allusion to her relatives, and what is more, to relatives residing in Paris. She had previously only spoken of them in general terms, giving people to understand that her relatives had not been unfortunate like herself—that they still retained their exalted rank, though she had fallen, and that she found it difficult to decline the favours they longed to heap upon her

However, Mademoiselle Marguerite evinced no surprise. "Go at once and inform your relatives, my dear Léon," she said, without a shade of sarcasm in her manner. "I hope they won't be offended by your devotion to me." But in her secret heart, she thought: "This hypocrite is going to report to the Marquis de Valorsay, and these relatives of hers will furnish her with excuses for future visits to him."

The General went off, the servants began to clear the table, and Mademoiselle Marguerite followed her hostess to the drawing-room. It was a lofty and spacious apartment, lighted by three windows, and even more sumptuous in its appointments than the dining-room. Furniture, carpets, and hangings, were all in rather poor taste, perhaps, but costly, very costly. As the evening was a cold one, Madame de Fondège ordered the fire to be lighted. She seated herself on a sofa near the mantelpiece, and when Mademoiselle Marguerite had taken a chair opposite her, she began, "Now, my dear child, let us have a quiet talk."

Mademoiselle Marguerite expected some important communication, so that she was not a little surprised when Madame de Fondège resumed: "Have you thought about your mourning?"

"About my mourning, madame?"

"Yes. I mean, have you decided what dresses you will purchase? It is an important matter, my dear—more important than you suppose. They are making costumes entirely of *crêpe* now, puffed and plaited, and extremely stylish. I saw one that would suit you well. You may think that a costume for deep mourning made with puffs would be a trifle *loud*, but that depends upon tastes. The Duchess de Veljo wore one only eleven days after her husband's death; and she allowed some of her hair, which is superb, to fall over her shoulders, *à la pleureuse*, and the effect was extremely touching." Was Madame de Fondège speaking sincerely? There could be no doubt of it. Her features, which had been distorted, with anger when the General took it into his head to order the bottle of Bordeaux, had regained their usual placidity of expression, and had even brightened a little. "I am entirely at your service, my dear, if you wish any shopping done," she continued. "And if you are not quite pleased with your dressmaker, I will take you to mine, who works like an angel. But how absurd I am. You will of course employ Van Klopen. I go to him occasionally myself, but only on great occasions. Between you and me, I think him a trifle too high in his charges."

Mademoiselle Marguerite could scarcely repress a smile. "I must confess, madame, that from my infancy I have been in the habit of making almost all my dresses myself."

The General's wife raised her eyes to Heaven in real or feigned astonishment. "Yourself!" she repeated four or five times, as if to make sure that she had heard aright. "Yourself! That is incomprehensible! You, the daughter of a man who possessed an income of five or six hundred thousand francs a year! Still I know that poor M. de Chalusse, though unquestionably a very worthy and excellent man, was peculiar in some of his ideas."

"Excuse me, madame. What I did, I did for my own pleasure."

But this assertion exceeded Madame de Fondège's powers of comprehension. "Impossible!" she murmured, "impossible! But, my poor child, what did you do for fashions—for patterns?"

The immense importance she attached to the matter was so manifest that Marguerite could not refrain from smiling. "I was probably not a very close follower of the fashions," she replied. "The dress that I am wearing now—"

"Is very pretty, my child, and it becomes you extremely; that's the truth. Only, to be frank, I must confess that this style is no longer worn—no—not at all. You must have your new dresses made in quite a different way."

"But I already have more dresses than I need, madame."

"What! black dresses?"

"I seldom wear anything but black."

Evidently her hostess had never heard anything like this before. "Oh! all right," said she, "these dresses will doubtless do very well for your first months of mourning—but afterwards? Do you suppose, my poor dear, that I'm going to allow you to shut yourself up as you did at the Hôtel de Chalusse? Good heavens! how dull it must have been for you, alone in that big house, without society or friends."

A tear fell from Marguerite's long lashes. "I was very happy there, madame," she murmured.

"You think so; but you will change your mind. When one has never

tasted real pleasure, one cannot realise how gloomy one's life really is. No doubt, you were very unhappy alone with M. de Chalusse."

"Oh! madame—"

"Tut! tut! my dear, I know what I am talking about. Wait until you have been introduced into society before you boast of the charms of solitude. Poor dear! I doubt if you have ever attended a ball in your whole life. No! I was sure of it, and you are twenty! Fortunately, I am here. I will take your mother's place, and we will make up for lost time! Beautiful as you are, my child—for you are divinely beautiful—you will reign as a queen wherever you appear. Doesn't that thought make that cold little heart of yours throb more quickly? Ah! *fêtes* and music, wonderful toilettes and the flashing of diamonds, the admiration of gentlemen, the envy of rivals, the consciousness of one's own beauty, are these delights not enough to fill any woman's life? It is intoxication, perhaps, but an intoxication which is happiness."

Was she sincere, or did she hope to dazzle this lonely girl, and then rule her through the tastes she might succeed in giving her? As is not unfrequently the case with callous natures, Madame de Fondège was a compound of frankness and cunning. What she was saying now she really meant; and as it was to her interest to say it, she urged her opinions boldly and even eloquently. Twenty-four hours earlier, proud and truthful Marguerite would have silenced her at once. She would have told her that such pleasures could never have any charm for her, and that she felt only scorn and disgust for such worthless aims and sordid desires. But having resolved to appear a dupe, she concealed her real feelings under an air of surprise, and was astonished and even ashamed to find that she could dissemble so well.

"Besides," continued Madame de Fondège, "a marriageable young girl should never shut herself up like a nun. She will never find a husband if she remains at home—and she must marry. Indeed, marriage is a sensible woman's only object in life, since it is her emancipation."

Was Madame de Fondège going to plead her son's cause? Mademoiselle Marguerite almost believed it—but the lady was too shrewd for that. She took good care not to mention as much as Lieutenant Gustave's name.

"The season will certainly be unusually brilliant," she said, "and it will begin very early. On the fifth of November, the Countess de Commarin will give a superb *fête;* all Paris will be there. On the seventh, there will be a ball at the house of the Viscountess de Bois d'Ardon. On the eleventh, there will be a concert, followed by a ball, at the superb mansion of the Baroness Trigault—you know—the wife of that strange man who spends all his time in playing cards."

"This is the first time I ever heard the name mentioned."

"Really! and you have been living in Paris for years. It seems incomprehensible. You must know then, my dear little ignoramus, that the Baroness Trigault is one of the most distinguished ladies in Paris, and certainly the best dressed. I am sure her bill at Van Klopen's is not less than a hundred thousand francs a year—and that is saying enough, is it not?" And with genuine pride, she added: "The baroness is my friend; I will introduce you to her."

Having once started on this theme, Madame de Fondège was not easily silenced. It was evidently her ambition to be considered a woman of the world, and to be acquainted with all the leaders of fashionable society; and, in fact, if one listened to her conversation for an hour one could learn

all the gossip of the day. Though she was unable to interest herself in this tittle-tattle, Marguerite was pretending to listen to it with profound attention when the drawing-room door suddenly opened and Évariste appeared with an impudent smile on his face. "Madame Landoire, the milliner, is here, and desires to speak with Madame la Comtesse," he said.

On hearing this name, Madame de Fondège started as if she had been stung by a viper. "Let her wait," she said quickly. "I will see her in a moment."

The order was useless, for the visitor was already on the threshold. She was a tall, dark-haired, ill mannered-woman. "Ah! I've found you at last," she said, rudely, "and I'm not sorry. This is the fourth time I've come here with my bill."

Madame de Fondège pointed to Mademoiselle Marguerite, and exclaimed: "Wait, at least, until I am alone before you speak to me on business."

Madame Landoire shrugged her shoulders. "As if you were ever alone," she growled. "I wish to put an end to this."

"Step into my room then, and we will put an end to it, and at once."

This opportunity to escape from Madame de Fondège must not be allowed to pass: so Marguerite asked permission to withdraw, declaring, what was really the truth, that she felt completely tired out. After receiving a maternal kiss from her hostess, accompanied by a "sleep well, my dear child," she retired to her own room. Thanks to Madame Léon's absence, she found herself alone, and, drawing a blotting-pad from one of her trunks, she hastily wrote a note to M. Isidore Fortunat, telling him that she would call upon him on the following Tuesday. "I must be very awkward," she thought, "if to-morrow, on going to mass, I can't find an opportunity to throw this note into a letter-box without being observed."

It was fortunate that she had lost no time, for her writing-case was scarcely in its place again before Madame Léon entered, evidently out of sorts. "Well," asked Marguerite, "did you see your friends?"

"Don't speak of it, my dear young lady; they were all of them away from home—they had gone to the play."

"Ah?"

"So I shall go again early to-morrow morning: you must realise how important it is."

"Yes, I understand."

But Madame Léon, who was usually so loquacious, did not seem to be in a talkative mood that evening, and, after kissing her dear young lady, she went into her own room.

"She did not succeed in finding the Marquis de Valorsay," thought Marguerite, "and being in doubt as to the part she is to play, she feels furious."

The young girl tried to sum up the impressions of the evening, and to decide upon a plan of conduct, but she felt sad and very weary. She said to herself that rest would be more beneficial than anything else, and that her mind would be clearer on the morrow; so after a fervent prayer in which Pascal Ferailleur's name was mentioned several times, she prepared for bed. But before she fell asleep she was able to collect another bit of evidence. The sheets on her bed were new.

If Marguerite had been born in the Hôtel de Chalusse, if she had known a father's and a mother's tender care from her infancy, if she had always been protected by a large fortune from the stern realities of life, there

would have been no hope for her now that she was left poor and alone—for how can a girl avoid dangers she is ignorant of? But from her earliest childhood Marguerite had studied the difficult science of real life under the best of teachers—misfortune. Cast upon her own resources at the age of thirteen, she had learned to look upon everybody and everything with distrust; and by relying only on herself, she had become strangely cautious and clear-sighted. She knew how to watch and how to listen, how to deliberate and how to act. Two men, the Marquis de Valorsay and M. de Fondège's son, coveted her hand; and one of the two, the marquis, so she believed, was capable of any crime. Still she felt no fears. She had been in danger once before when she was little more than a child, when the brother of her employer insulted her with his attentions, but she had escaped unharmed.

Deceit was certainly most repugnant to her truth loving nature; but it was the only weapon of defence she possessed. And so on the following day she carefully studied the abode of her entertainers. And certainly the study was instructive. The General's household was truly Parisian in character; or, at least, it was what a Parisian household inevitably becomes when its inmates fall a prey to the constantly increasing passion for luxury and display, to the *furore* for aping the habits and expenditure of millionaires, and to the noble and elevated desire of humiliating and outshining their neighbours. Ease, health, and comfort had been unscrupulously sacrificed to show. The dining-room was magnificent, the drawing-room superb; but these were the only comfortably furnished apartments in the establishment. The other rooms were bare and desolate. It is true that Madame de Fondège, had a handsome wardrobe with glass doors in her own room, but this was an article which the friend of the fashionable Baroness Trigault could not possibly dispense with. On the other hand, her bed had no curtains.

The aspect of the place fittingly explained the habits and manners of the inmates. What sinister fears must have haunted them! for how could this extreme destitution in one part of the establishment be reconciled with the luxury noticeable in the other, except by the fact that a desperate struggle to keep up appearances was constantly going on? And this constant anxiety made out-door noise, excitement, and gaiety a necessity of their existence, and caused them to welcome anything that took them from the home where they had barely sufficient to deceive society, and not enough to impose upon their creditors. "And they keep three servants," thought Mademoiselle Marguerite—"three enemies who spend their time in ridiculing them, and torturing their vanity."

Thus, on the very first day after her arrival, she realised the real situation of the General and his wife. They were certainly on the verge of ruin when Mademoiselle Marguerite accepted their hospitality. Everything went to prove this: the coachman's insolent demand, the servants' impudence, the grocer's refusal to furnish a single bottle of wine on credit, the milliner's persistence, and, lastly, the new sheets on the visitors' beds. "Yes," thought Mademoiselle Marguerite to herself, "the Fondèges were ruined when I came here. They would never have sunk so low if they had not been utterly destitute of resources. So, if they rise again, if money and credit come back again, then the old magistrate is right—they have obtained possession of the Chalusse millions!"

IX.

On this side, at least, Mademoiselle Marguerite had no very wide field of investigation to explore. Her common sense told her that her task would merely consist in carefully watching the behaviour of the General and his wife, in noting their expenditure, and so on. It was a matter of close attention, and of infinitesimal trifles. Nor was she much encouraged by her first success. It was, perhaps, important; and yet it might be nothing. For she felt that the real difficulties would not begin until she became morally certain that the General had stolen the millions that were missing from the count's escritoire. Even then it would remain for her to discover how he had obtained possession of this money. And when she had succeeded in doing this, would her task be ended? Certainly not. She must obtain sufficient evidence to give her the right of accusing the General openly, and in the face of every one. She must have material and indisputable proofs before she could say: "A robbery has been committed. I was accused of it. I was innocent. Here is the culprit!"

What a long journey must be made before this goal was reached! No matter! Now that she had a positive and fixed point of departure, she felt that she possessed enough energy to sustain her in her endeavours for years, if need be. What troubled her most was that she could not logically explain the conduct of her enemies from the time M. de Fondège had asked her hand for his son up to the present moment. And first, why had they been so audacious or so imprudent as to bring her to their own home if they had really stolen one of those immense amounts that are sure to betray their possessors? "They are mad," she thought, "or else they must deem me blind, deaf, and more stupid than mortal ever was!" Secondly, why should they be so anxious to marry her to their son, Lieutenant Gustave? This also was a puzzling question. However, she was fully decided on one point: the suspicions of the Fondège family must not be aroused. If they were on their guard, it would be the easiest thing in the world for them to pay their debts quietly, and increase their expenditure so imperceptibly that she would not be able to prove a sudden acquisition of wealth.

But the events of the next few days dispelled these apprehensions. That very afternoon, although it was Sunday, it became evident that a shower of gold had fallen on the General's abode. The door-bell rang incessantly for several hours, and an interminable procession of tradesmen entered. It looked very much as if M. de Fondège had called a meeting of his creditors. They came in haughty and arrogant, with their hats upon their heads, and surly of speech, like people who have made up their minds to accept their loss, but who intend to pay themselves in rudeness. They were ushered into the drawing-room where the General was holding his *levée;* they remained there from five to ten minutes, and then, bowing low with hat in hand, they retired with radiant countenances, and an obsequious smile on their lips. So they had been paid. And as if to prove to Mademoiselle Marguerite that her suspicions were correct, she chanced to be present when the livery stable-keeper presented his bill.

Madame de Fondège received him very haughtily. "Ah! here you are!" she exclaimed, rudely, as soon as he appeared. "So you are the man who teaches his drivers to insult his customers? That is an excellent

way to gain patronage. What! I hire a one-horse carriage from you by the month, and because I happen to wish for a two-horse vehicle for a single day, you make me pay the difference. You should demand payment in advance if you are so suspicious."

The stable-keeper, who had a bill for nearly four thousand francs in his pocket, stood listening with the air of a man who is meditating some crushing reply; but she did not give him time to deliver it. "When I have cause to complain of the people I employ, I dismiss them and replace them by others. Insolence is one of those things that I never forgive. Give me your bill."

The man, in whose face doubt, fear, and hope had succeeded each other in swift succession, thereupon drew an interminable bill from his pocket. And when he saw the bank-notes, when he saw the bill paid without dispute or even examination, he was seized with a wondering respect, and his voice became sweeter than honey. They say the payment of a bad debt delights a merchant a thousand times more than the settlement of fifty good ones. The truth of this assertion became apparent in the present case. Mademoiselle Marguerite thought the man was going to beg "Madame la Comtesse to do him the favour to withhold a portion of the small amount." For the Parisian tradesman is so constituted that very frequently it is not necessary to pay him money, but only to show it.

However, this creditor's abnegation did not extend so far; still he did entreat Madame la Comtesse not to leave him on account of a blunder—for it was a blunder—he swore it on his children's heads. His coachman was only a fool and a drunkard, who had misunderstood him entirely, and whom he should ignominiously dismiss on returning to his establishment. But "Madame la Comtesse" was inflexible. She sent the man about his business, saying, "I never place myself in a position to be treated with disrespect a second time."

This probably accounted for the fact that Evariste, the footman, who had been so wanting in respect the previous evening, had been sent away that very morning. Mademoiselle Marguerite did not see him again. Dinner was served by a new servant, who had been sent by an Employment Office, and engaged without a question, no doubt because Evariste's livery fitted him like a glove. Had the cook also been replaced? Mademoiselle Marguerite thought so, though she had no means of convincing herself on this point. It was certain, however, that the Sunday dinner was utterly unlike that of the evening before. Quality had replaced quantity, and care, profusion. It was not necessary to send to the cellar for a bottle of Château-Laroze; it made its appearance at the proper moment, warmed to the precise degree of temperature, and seemed quite to the taste of excellent Madame Léon.

In twenty-four hours the Fondège family had been raised to such affluence that they must have asked themselves if it were possible they had ever known the agonies of that life of false appearances and sham luxury which is a thousand times worse than an existence of abject poverty. "Is it possible that I am deceived?" Marguerite said to herself, on retiring to her room that evening. For it surprised her that a keen sighted person like Madame Léon should not have remarked this revolution; but the worthy companion merely declared the General and his wife to be charming people, and did not cease to congratulate her dear young lady upon having accepted their hospitality. "I feel quite at home here," said she; "and though my room is a trifle small, I shall have nothing to wish for when it has been refurnished."

Mademoiselle Marguerite spent a restless and uncomfortable night. In spite of her reason, in spite of the convincing proofs she had seen, the most disturbing doubts returned. Might she not have judged the situation with a prejudiced mind? Had the Fondèges really been as reduced in circumstances as she supposed? Like every one who has been unfortunate, she feared illusions, and was extremely distrustful of everything that seemed to favour her hopes and wishes. The only thing that really encouraged her was the thought that she could consult the old magistrate, and that M. de Chalussi's former agent might succeed in finding Pascal Ferailleur. M. Fortuna must have received her letter by this time: he would undoubtedly expect her on Tuesday, and it only remained for her to invent some excuse which would give her a couple of hours' liberty without awakening suspicion.

She rose early the next morning, and had almost completed her toilette, when she heard some one in the passage outside rapping at the door of Madame Léon's room. "Who's there?" inquired that worthy lady.

It was Justine, Madame de Fondège's maid, who answered in a pert voice, "Here is a letter, madame, which has just been sent up by the concierge. It is addressed to Madame Léon. That is your name, is it not?"

Marguerite staggered as if she had received a heavy blow. "My God! a letter from the Marquis de Valorsay!" she thought.

It was evident that the estimable lady was expecting this missive by the eagerness with which she sprang out of bed and opened the door. And Marguerite heard her say to the servant in her sweetest voice: "A thousand thanks, my child! Ah! this is a great relief. I have heard from my brother-in-law at last. I recognise his hand-writing." And then the door closed again.

Standing silent and motionless in the middle of her room, Marguerite listened with that feverish anxiety that excites the perceptive faculties to the utmost degree. An inward voice, stronger than reason, told her that this letter threatened her happiness, her future, perhaps her life! But how could she convince herself of the truth of this presentiment? If she had followed her first impulse, she would have rushed into Madame Léon's room and have snatched the letter from her hands. But if she did this, she would betray herself, and prove that she was not the dupe they supposed her to be, and this supposition on the part of her enemies constituted her only chance of salvation.

If she could only watch Madame Léon as she read the letter, and gain some information from the expression of her face; but this seemed impossible, for the key-hole was blocked up by the key, which had been left in the lock on the other side. Suddenly a crack in the partition attracted her attention, and finding that it extended through the wall, she realised she might watch what was passing in the adjoining room. So she approached the spot on tiptoe, and, with bated breath, stooped and looked in.

In her impatience to learn the contents of her letter, Madame Léon had not gone back to bed. She had broken the seal, and was reading the missive, standing barefooted in her night-dress, directly opposite the little crevice. She read line after line, and word after word, and her knitted brows and compressed lips suggested deep concentration of thought mingled with discontent. At last she shrugged her shoulders, muttered a few inaudible words, and laid the open letter upon the rickety chest of drawers, which, with two chairs and a bed, constituted the entire furniture of her apartment.

"My God!" exclaimed Marguerite, with bated breath, "if she vould only forget it!"

But she did not forget it. She began to dress, and when she had finished she read the letter again, and then placed it carefully in one of the drawers, which she locked, putting the key in her pocket.

"I shall never know, then," thought Marguerite; "no, I shal never know. But I must know—and I will!" she added vehemently.

From that moment a firm determination to obtain that letter took possession of her mind; and so deeply was she occupied in seeking for some means to surmount the difficulties which stood in her way that she did not say a dozen words during breakfast. "I must be a fool if I can't fnd some way of gaining possession of that letter," she said to herself again and again. "I'm sure I could find in it the explanation of the abominable intrigue which Pascal and I are the victims of."

Happily, her preoccupation was not remarked. Each person present was too deeply engrossed in his or her own concerns to notice the behaviour of the others. Madame Léon's mind was occupied with the news she had just received: and, besides, her attention was considerably attracted by some partridges garnished with truffles, and a bottle of Château-Laroze. For she was rather fond of good living, the dear lady, as she confessed herself, adding that no one is perfect. The General talked of nothing but a certain pair of horses which he was to look at that afternoon, and which he thought of buying—being quite disgusted with job-masters, so he declared. Besides, he expected to get the animals at a bargain, as they were the property of a young gentleman who had been led to commit certain misdemeanours by his love of gambling and his passion for a notorious woman who was afflicted with an insatiable desire for jewelry.

As for Madame de Fondège, her head seemed to have been completely turned by the prospect of the approaching *fête* at the Countess de Commarin's. She had only a fortnight left to make her preparations. All the evening before, through part of the night, and ever since she had been awake that morning, she had been racking her brain to arrive at an effective combination of colours and materials. And at the cost of a terrible headache, she had at last conceived one of those *toilettes* which are sure to make a sensation, and which the newspaper reporters will mention as noticeable for its "*chic*." "Picture to yourself," she said, all ablaze with enthusiasm, "picture to yourself a robe of tea-flower silk, trimmed with bands of heavy holland-tinted satin, thickly embroidered with flowers. A wide flounce of Valenciennes at the bottom of the skirt. Over this, I shall wear a tunic of pearl-grey *crêpe*, edged with a fringe of the various shades in the dress, and forming a panier behind."

But how much trouble, time and labour must be expended before such an elaborate *chef-d'œuvre* could be completed! How many conferences with the dressmaker, with the florist, and the embroiderer! How many doubts, how many inevitable mistakes! Ah! there was not a moment to lose! Madame de Fondège, who was dressed to go out, and who had already sent for a carriage, insisted that Mademoiselle Marguerite should accompany her. And certainly, the General's wife deemed the proposal a seductive one. It is a very fashionable amusement to run from one shop to another, even when one cannot, or will not, buy. It is a custom, which some noble ladies have imported from America, to the despair of the poor shopkeepers. And thus every fine afternoon, the swell shops are filled to overflowing with richly-attired dames and damsels, who ask to see all the new goods. It is

far more amusing than remaining at home. And when they return to dinner in the evening, after inspecting hundreds of yards of silk and satin, they are very well pleased with themselves, for they have not lost the day. Nor do the shrewdest always return from these expeditions empty-handed. A dozen gloves or a piece of lace can be hidden so easily in the folds of a mantle!

And yet, to Madame de Fondège's great surprise, Marguerite declined the invitation. "I have so many things to put in order," she added, feeling that an excuse was indispensable.

But Madame Léon, who had not the same reasons as her dear child for wishing to remain at home, kindly offered her services. She was acquainted with several of the best shops, she declared, particularly with the establishment of a dealer in laces, in the Rue de Mulhouse, and thanks to an introduction from her, Madame de Fondège could not fail to conclude a very advantageous bargain there. "Very well," replied Madame de Fondège, "I will take you with me, then; but make haste and dress while I put on my bonnet."

They left the breakfast-room at the same time, closely followed by Mademoiselle Marguerite, who was disturbed by a hope which she scarcely dared confess to herself. With her forehead resting against the wall, and her eye peering through the tiny crack, she watched her governess change her dress, throw a shawl over her shoulders, put on her best bonnet, and, after a glance at the looking-glass, rush from the room, exclaiming: "Here I am, my dear countess. I'm ready."

And a few moments afterwards they left the house together.

As the outer door closed after them, Marguerite's brain whirled. If she were not deceived, Madame Léon had left the key of the drawers in the pocket of the dress she had just taken off. So it was with a wildly throbbing heart that she opened the communicating door and entered her "companion's" room. She hastily approached the bed on which the dress was lying, and, with a trembling hand, she began to search for the pocket. Fortune favoured her! The key was there. The letter was within her reach. But she was about to do a deed against which her whole nature revolted. To steal a key, to force an article of furniture open, and violate the secret of a private correspondence, these were actions so repugnant to her sense of honour, and her pride, that for some time she stood irresolute. At last the instinct of self-preservation overpowered her scruples. Was not her honour, and Pascal's honour also, at stake—as well as their mutual love and happiness? "It would be folly to hesitate," she murmured. And with a firm hand she placed the key in the lock.

The latter was out of order and the drawer was only opened with difficulty. But there, on some clothes which Madame Léon had not yet found time to arrange, Marguerite saw the letter. She eagerly snatched it up, unfolded it, and read: "Dear Madame Léon—" "Dear me," she muttered, "here is the name in full. This is an indiscretion which will render denial difficult." And she resumed her perusal: "Your letter, which I have just received, confirms what my servants had already told me: that twice during my absence—on Saturday evening and Sunday morning—you called at my house to see me." So Mademoiselle Marguerite's penetration had served her well. All this talk about anxious relatives had only been an excuse invented by Madame Léon to enable her to absent herself whenever occasion required. "I regret," continued the letter, "that you did not find me at home, for I have instructions of the greatest importance

to give you. We are approaching the decisive moment. I have formed a plan which will completely, and forever, efface all remembrance of that cursed P. F., in case anyone condescended to think of him after the disgrace we fastened upon him the other evening at the house of Madame d'Argelès." P. F.—these initials of course meant Pascal Ferailleur. Then he was innocent, and she held an undeniable, irrefutable proof of his innocence in her hands. How coolly and impudently Valorsay confessed his atrocious crime! "A bold stroke is in contemplation which, if no unfortunate and well-nigh impossible accident occur, will throw the girl into my arms." Marguerite shuddered. "The girl" referred to her, of course. "Thanks to the assistance of one of my friends," added the letter, "I can place this proud damsel in a perilous, terribly perilous position, from which she cannot possibly extricate herself unaided. But, just as she gives herself up for lost, I shall interpose. I shall save her; and it will be strange if gratitude does not work the necessary miracle in my favour. The plan is certain to succeed. Still, it will be all the better if the physician who attended M. de C—— in his last moments, and whom you spoke to me about (Dr. Jodon, if I remember rightly), will consent to lend us a helping hand. What kind of a man is he? If he is accessible to the seductive influence of a few thousand francs, I shall consider the business as good as concluded. Your conduct up to the present time has been a *chef-d'œuvre*, for which you shall be amply compensated. You have cause to know that I am not ungrateful. Let the F's continue their intrigues, and even pretend to favour them. I am not afraid of these people. I understand their game perfectly, and know why they wish my little one to marry their son. But when they become troublesome, I shall crush them like glass. In spite of these explanations, which I have just given you for your guidance, it is very necessary that I should see you. I shall look for you on Tuesday afternoon, between three and four o'clock. Above all, don't fail to bring me the desired information respecting Dr. Jodon. I am, my dear madame, devotedly your's—V." Below ran a postscript which read as follows: "When you come on Tuesday bring this letter with you. We will burn it together. Don't imagine that I distrust you—but there is nothing so dangerous as letters."

For some time Marguerite stood stunned and appalled by the Marquis de Valorsay's audacity, and by the language of this letter, which was at once so obscure and so clear, every line of it threatening her future. The reality surpassed her worst apprehensions, but realising the gravity of the situation, she shook off the torpor stealing over her. She felt that every second was precious, and that she must act, and act at once. But what should she do? Simply return the letter to its place, and continue to act the *rôle* of a dupe, as if nothing had happened? No; that must not be. It would be madness not to seize this flagrant proof of the Marquis de Valorsay's infamy. But on the other hand, if she kept the letter, Madame Léon would immediately discover its loss, and an explanation would be unavoidable. M. de Valorsay would be worsted, but not annihilated, and the plans which made the physician's intervention a necessity would never be revealed. She thought of hastening to her friend the old magistrate; but he lived a long way off, and time was pressing. Besides she might not find him at home. Then she thought of going to a notary, to a judge. She would show them the letter, and they could take a copy of it. But no—this would do no good—the marquis could still deny it. She was becoming desperate, and was accusing herself of stupidity, when a sudden

inspiration illumined her mind, turning night into day, as it were. "Oh, Pascal, we are saved!" she exclaimed. And without pausing to deliberate any longer, she threw a mantle over her shoulders, hastily tied on her bonnet, and hurried from the house, without saying a word to any one.

Unfortunately she was not acquainted with this part of Paris, and on reaching the Rue Pigalle she was at a loss for her way. Unwilling to waste any more time, she hastily entered a grocer's shop at the corner of the Rue Pigalle and the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, and anxiously inquired: "Do you know any photographer in this neighbourhood, monsieur?"

Her agitation made this question seem so singular that the grocer looked at her closely for a moment, as if to make sure that she was not jesting. "You have only to go down the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette," he replied, "and on the left hand side, at the foot of the hill, you will find the photographer Carjat."

"Thank you."

The grocer stepped to the door to watch her. "That girl is certainly light-headed," he thought.

Her demeanour was really so extraordinary that it attracted the attention of the passers-by. She saw this, and slackening her pace, tried to become more composed. At the spot the grocer had indicated, she perceived several show frames filled with photographs hanging on either side of a broad open gate-way, above which ran the name, "E. Carjat." She went in, and seeing a man standing at the door of an elegant pavilion on the right hand side of a large courtyard, she approached him, and asked for his employer.

"He is here," replied the man. "Does madame come for a photograph?"

"Yes."

"Then will madame be so kind as to pass in. She will not be obliged to wait long. There are only four or five persons before her."

Four or five persons! How long would she be obliged to wait?—half an hour—two hours? She had not the slightest idea. But she *did* know that she had not a second to lose, that Madame Léon might return at any moment, and find the letter missing; and, to crown all, she remembered now that she had not even locked the drawer again. "I cannot wait," she said, imperiously. "I must speak to M. Carjat at once."

"But—"

"At once, I tell you. Go and tell him that he must come."

Her tone was so commanding, and there was so much authority in her glance, that the servant hesitated no longer. He ushered her into a little sitting-room, and said, "If madame will take a seat, I will call monsieur."

She sank on to a chair, for her limbs were failing her. She was beginning to realise the strangeness of the step she had taken—to fear the result it might lead to—and to be astonished at her own boldness. But she had no time to prepare what she wished to say, for a man of five-and-thirty, wearing a moustache and imperial, and clad in a velvet coat, entered the room, and bowing with an air of surprise, exclaimed: "You desire to speak with me, madame?"

"I have a great favour to ask of you, monsieur."

"Of me?"

She drew M. de Valorsay's letter from her pocket, and, showing it to the photographer, she said, "I have come to you, monsieur, to ask you to

photograph this letter—but at once—before me—and quickly—very quickly. The honour of two persons is imperilled by each moment I lose here."

Mademoiselle Marguerite's embarrassment was extreme. Her cheeks were crimson, and she trembled like a leaf. Still her attitude was proud, generous enthusiasm glowed in her dark eyes, and her tone of voice revealed the serenity of a lofty soul ready to dare anything for a just and noble cause. This striking contrast—this struggle between girlish timidity and a lover's virgil energy, endowed her with a strange and powerful charm, which the photographer made no attempt to resist. Unusual as was the request, he did not hesitate. "I am ready to do what you desire, madame," he replied, bowing again.

"Oh! monsieur, how can I ever thank you?"

He did not stop to listen to her thanks. Not wishing to return to the reception-room, where five or six clients were impatiently awaiting their turn, he called one of his subordinates, and ordered him to bring the necessary apparatus at once. While he was speaking, Mademoiselle Marguerite paused; but, as soon as his instructions were concluded, she remarked: "Perhaps you are too hasty, sir. You have not allowed me to explain; and perhaps what I desire is impossible. I came on the impulse of the moment, without any knowledge on the subject. Before you set to work, I must know if what you can do will answer my purpose."

"Speak, madame."

"Will the copy you obtain be precisely like the original in every particular?"

"In every particular."

"The writing will be the same—exactly the same?"

"Absolutely the same."

"So like, that if one of your photographs should be presented to the person who wrote this letter—"

"He could no more deny his hand-writing than he could if some one handed him the letter itself."

"And the operation will leave no trace on the original?"

"None."

A smile of triumph played upon Mademoiselle Marguerite's lips. It was as she had thought; the defensive plan which she had suddenly conceived was a good one. "One more question, sir," she resumed. "I am only a poor, ignorant girl; excuse me, and give me the benefit of your knowledge. This letter will be returned to its author to-morrow, and he will burn it. But afterwards, in case of any difficulty—in case of a law-suit—or in case it should be necessary for me to prove certain things which one might establish by means of this letter, would one of your photographs be admitted as evidence?"

The photographer did not answer for a moment. Now he understood Mademoiselle Marguerite's motive, and the importance she attached to a fac-simile. But this imparted an unexpected gravity to the service he was called upon to perform. He therefore wished some time for reflection, and he scrutinized Mademoiselle Marguerite as if he were trying to read her very soul. Was it possible that this young girl, with such a pure and noble brow, and with such frank, honest eyes, could be meditating any cowardly, dishonourable act? No, he could not believe it. In whom, or in what, could he trust if such a countenance deceived him? "My fac-simile would certainly be admitted as evidence," he replied at last; "and this would not be the first time that the decision of a court has depended on proofs which have been photographed by me."

Meanwhile, his assistant had returned, bringing the necessary apparatus with him. When all was ready, the photographer asked her, "Will you give me the letter, madame?"

She hesitated for a second—only for a second. The man's honest, kindly face told her that he would not betray her, that he would rather give her assistance. So she handed him the Marquis de Valorsay's letter, saying, with melancholy dignity, "It is my happiness and my future that I place in your hands—and I have no fears."

He read her thoughts, and understood that she either dared not ask for a pledge of secrecy, or else that she thought it unnecessary. He took pity on her, and his last doubt fled. "I shall read this letter, madame," said he, "but I am the only person who will read it. I give you my word on that! No one but myself will see the proofs."

Greatly moved, she offered him her hand, and simply said, "Thanks; I am more than repaid."

To obtain an absolutely perfect fac-simile of a letter is a delicate and sometimes lengthy operation. However, at the end of about twenty minutes, the photographer possessed two negatives that promised him perfect proofs. He looked at them with a satisfied air; and then returning the letter to Mademoiselle Marguerite, he said, "In less than three days the fac-similes will be ready, madame; and if you will tell me to what address I ought to send them—"

She trembled on hearing these words, and quickly answered, "Don't send them, sir—keep them carefully. Great heavens! all would be lost if it came to the knowledge of any one. I will send for them, or come myself." And, feeling the extent of her obligation, she added, "But I will not go without introducing myself—I am Mademoiselle Marguerite de Chalusse." And, thereupon, she went off, leaving the photographer surprised at the adventure and dazzled by his strange visitor's beauty.

Rather more than an hour had elapsed since Marguerite left M. de Fondège's house. "How time flies!" she murmured, quickening her pace as much as she could without exciting remark—"how time flies!" But, hurried as she was, she stopped and spent five minutes at a shop in the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette, where she purchased some black ribbon and a few other trifles. How else could she explain and justify her absence, if the servants, who had probably discovered she had gone out, chanced to speak of it?

But her heart throbbed as if it would burst as she ascended the General's staircase, and anxiety checked her breathing as she rang the bell. "What if Madame de Fondège and Madame Léon had returned, and the abstraction of the letter been discovered!" Fortunately, Madame de Fondège required more than an hour to purchase the materials for the elaborate toilette she had dreamt of. The ladies were still out, and Mademoiselle Marguerite found everything in the same condition as she had left it. She carefully placed the letter in the drawer again, locked it, and put the key in the pocket of Madame Léon's dress. Then she breathed freely once more; and, for the first time in six days, she felt something very like joy in her heart. Now she had no fear of the Marquis de Valorsay. She had him in her power. He would destroy his letter the next day, and think that he was annihilating all proofs of his infamy. Not so. At the decisive moment, at the very moment of his triumph, she would produce the photograph of this letter, and crush him. And she—only a young girl—had outwitted this consummate scoundrel! "I have not been unworthy of Pascal," she said to herself, with a flash of pride.

However, her nature was not one of those weak ones which are become intoxicated by the first symptom of success, and then relax in their efforts. When her excitement had abated a little, she was inclined to disparage rather than to exaggerate the advantage she had gained. What she desired was a complete, startling, incontestable victory. It was not enough to prove Valorsay's *guilt*—she was resolved to penetrate his designs, to discover why he pursued her so desperately. And, though she felt that she possessed a formidable weapon of defence, she could not drive away her gloomy forebodings when she thought of the threats contained in the marquis's letter. "Thanks to the assistance of one of my friends," he wrote, "I can place this proud girl in a perilous, terribly perilous, position, from which she cannot possibly extricate herself unaided."

These words persistently lingered in Mademoiselle Marguerite's mind. What was the danger hanging over her? whence would it come? and in what form? What abominable machination might she not expect from the villain who had deliberately dishonoured Pascal? How would he attack her? Would he strive to ruin her reputation, or did he intend to forcibly abduct her? Would he attempt to decoy her into a trap where she would be subjected to the insults of the vilest wretches? A thousand frightful memories of the time when she was an apprentice drove her nearly frantic. "I will never go out unarmed," she thought, "and woe to the man who raises his hand against me!"

The vagueness of the threat increased her fears. No one is courageous enough to confront an unknown, mysterious, and always imminent danger without sometimes faltering. Nor was this all. The marquis was not her only enemy. She had the Fondège family to dread—these dangerous hypocrites, who had taken her to their home so that they might ruin her the more surely. M. de Valorsay wrote that he had no fears of the Fondèges—that he understood their little game. What was their little game? No doubt they were resolved that she should become their son's wife, even if they were obliged to use force to win her consent. At this thought a sudden terror seized her soul, so full of peace and hope an instant before. When she was attacked, would she have time to produce and use the fac-simile of Valorsay's letter? "I must reveal my secret to a friend—to a trusty friend—who will avenge me!" she muttered.

Fortunately she had a friend in whom she could safely confide—the old magistrate who had given her such proofs of sympathy. She felt that she needed the advice of a riper experience than her own, and the thought of consulting him at once occurred to her. She was alone; she had no spy to fear; and it would be folly not to profit by the few moments of liberty that remained. So she drew her writing-case from her trunk, and, after barricading her door to prevent a surprise, she wrote her friend an account of the events which had taken place since their last interview. She told him everything with rare precision and accuracy of detail, sending him a copy of Valorsay's letter, and informing him that, in case any misfortune befell her, he could obtain the fac-similes from Carjat. She finished her letter, but did not seal it. "If anything should happen before I have an opportunity to post it, I will add a postscript," she said to herself.

She had made all possible haste, fearing that Madame de Fondège and Madame Léon might return at any moment. But this was truly a chimerical apprehension. It was nearly six o'clock when the two shoppers made their appearance, wearied with the labours of the day, but in fine spirits. Besides purchasing every requisite for that wonderful costume of hers, the

General's wife had found some laces of rare beauty, which she had secured for the mere trifle of four thousand francs. "It was one of those opportunities one ought always to profit by," she said, as she displayed her purchase. "Besides, it is the same with lace as with diamonds, you should purchase them when you can—then you have them. It isn't an outlay—it's an investment." Subtle reasoning that has cost many a husband dear!

On her side, Madame Léon proudly showed her dear young lady a very pretty present which Madame de Fondège had given her. "So money is no longer lacking in this household," thought Mademoiselle Marguerite, all the more confirmed in her suspicions.

The General came in a little later, accompanied by a friend, and Marguerite soon discovered that the worthy man had spent the day as profitably as his wife. He too was quite tired out; and he had reason to be fatigued. First, he had purchased the horses belonging to the ruined spendthrift, and he had paid five thousand francs for them, a mere trifle for such animals. Less than an hour after the purchase he had refused almost double that amount from a celebrated *connoisseur* in horse-flesh, M. de Breulh-Faverlay. This excellent speculation had put him in such good-humour that he had been unable to resist the temptation of purchasing a beautiful saddle-horse, which they let him have for a hundred louis. He had not been foolish, for he was sure that he could sell the animal again at an advance of a thousand francs whenever he wished to do so. "So," remarked his friend, "if you bought such a horse every day, you would make three hundred and sixty-five thousand francs a year."

Was this only a jest—one of those witticisms which people who boast of wonderful bargains must expect to parry, or had the remark a more serious meaning? Marguerite could not determine. One thing is certain, the General did not lose his temper, but gaily continued his account of the way in which he had spent his time. Having purchased the horses, his next task was to find a carriage, and he had heard of a barouche which a Russian prince had ordered but didn't take, so that the builder was willing to sell it at less than cost price; and to recoup this worthy man, the General had purchased a brougham as well. He had, moreover, hired stabling in the Rue Pigalle, only a few steps from the house, and he expected a coachman and a groom the following morning.

"And all this will cost us less than the miserable vehicle we have been hiring by the year," observed Madame de Fondège, gravely. "Oh, I know what I say. I've counted the cost. What with gratuities and extras, it costs us now fully a thousand francs a month, and three horses and a coachman won't cost you more. And what a difference! I shall no longer be obliged to blush for the skinny horses the stable-keeper sends me, nor to endure the insolence of his men. The first outlay frightened me a little; but that is made now, and I am delighted. We will save it in something else."

"In laces, no doubt," thought Mademoiselle Marguerite. She was intensely exasperated, and on regaining her chamber she said to herself, for the tenth time, "What do they take me for? Do they think me an idiot to flaunt the millions they have stolen from my father—that they have stolen from me—before my eyes in this fashion? A common thief would take care not to excite suspicion by a foolish expenditure of the fruits of his knavery, but they—they have lost their senses."

Madame Léon was already in bed, and when Mademoiselle Marguerite was satisfied that she was asleep, she took her letter from her trunk, and

added this postscript: "P. S.—It is impossible to retain the shadow of a doubt, M. and Madame de Fondège have spent certainly twenty thousand francs to-day. This audacity must arise from a conviction that no proofs of the crime they have committed exist. Still they continue to talk to me about their son, Lieutenant Gustave. He will be presented to me to-morrow. To-morrow, also, between three and four, I shall be at the house of a man who can perhaps discover Pascal's hiding-place for me,—the house of M. Isidore Fortunat. I hope to make my escape easily enough, for at that same hour, Madame Léon has an appointment with the Marquis de Valorsay."

X.

THE old legend of Achilles' heel will be eternally true. A man may be humble or powerful, feeble or strong, but there are none of us without some weak spot in our armour, a spot vulnerable beyond all others, a certain place where wounds prove most dangerous and painful. M. Isidore Fortunat's weak place was his cash box. To attack him there was to endanger his life—to wound him at a point where all his sensibility centred. For it was in this cash box and not in his breast that his heart really throbbed. His safe made him happy or dejected. Happy when it was filled to overflowing by some brilliant operation, and dejected when he saw it become empty as some imprudent transaction failed.

This then explains his frenzy on that ill-fated Sunday, when, after being brutally dismissed by M. Wilkie, he returned to his rooms in the company of his clerk, Victor Chupin. This explains, too, the intensity of the hatred he now felt for the Marquis de Valorsay and the Viscount de Coralth. The former, the marquis, had defrauded him of forty thousand francs in glittering gold. The other, the viscount, had suddenly sprung up out of the ground, and carried off from under his very nose that magnificent prize, the Chalusse inheritance, which he had considered as good as won. And he had not only been defrauded and swindled—such were his own expressions—but he had been tricked, deceived, duped, and outwitted, and by whom? By people who did not make it their profession to be shrewd, like he did himself. Just fancy, his business was to outwit others, and a couple of mere amateurs had outgeneraled him. He had not only suffered in pocket he had been humiliated as well, and so he indulged in threats of such terrible import.

However, at the very moment when he was dreaming of wreaking vengeance on the Marquis de Valorsay and the Viscount de Coralth, his housekeeper, austere Madame Dodelin, handed him Mademoiselle Marguerite's letter. He read it with intense astonishment, rubbing his eyes as if to assure himself that he were really awake. "Tuesday," he repeated, "the day after to-morrow—at your house—between three and four o'clock—I must speak with you."

His manner was so strange, and his usually impassive face so disturbed by conflicting feelings, that Madame Dodelin's curiosity overcame her prudence, and she remained standing in front of him with open mouth, staring with all her eyes and listening with all her ears. He perceived this, and angrily exclaimed: "What are you doing here? You are watching me, I do believe. Get back to your kitchen, or—"

She fled in alarm, and he then entered his private office. His heart was

leaping with joy, and he laughed wickedly at the hope of a speedy revenge. "She's on the scent," he muttered; "and she has luck in her favour. She has chanced to apply to me on the very day that I had resolved to defend and rehabilitate her lover, the honest fool who allowed himself to be dishonoured by those unscrupulous blackguards. Just as I was thinking of going in search of her, she comes to me. As I was about to write to her, she writes to me. Who can deny the existence of Providence after this?" Like many other people, M. Fortunat piously believed in Providence when things went to his liking, but it is sad to add that in the contrary case he denied its existence. "If she has any courage," he resumed, "and she seems to have plenty of it, Valorsay and Coralth will be in a tight place soon. And if it takes ten thousand francs to put them there, and if neither Mademoiselle Marguerite nor M. Ferailleur has the amount—ah, well! I'll advance—well, at least five thousand—without charging them any commission. I'll even pay the expenses out of my own pocket, if necessary. Ah, my fine fellows, you've laughed too soon. In a week's time we'll see who laughs last."

He paused, for Victor Chupin, who had lingered behind to pay the driver, had just entered the room. "You gave me twenty francs, m'sieur," he remarked to his employer. "I paid the driver four francs and five sous, here's the change."

"Keep it for yourself, Victor," said M. Fortunat.

What! keep fifteen francs and fifteen sous? Under any other circumstances, such unusual generosity would have drawn a grimace of satisfaction from young Chupin. But to-day he did not even smile; he slipped the money carelessly into his pocket, and scarcely deigned to say "thanks," in the coldest possible tone.

Absorbed in thought, M. Fortunat did not remark this little circumstance. "We have them, Victor," he resumed. "I told you that Valorsay and Coralth should pay me for their treason. Vengeance is near. Read this letter." Victor read it slowly, and as soon as he had finished his employer ejaculated, "Well?"

But Chupin was not a person to give advice lightly. "Excuse me, m'sieur," said he, "but in order to answer you, I must have some knowledge of the affair. I only know what you've told me—which is little enough—and what I've guessed. In fact, I know nothing at all."

M. Fortunat reflected for a moment. "You are right, Victor," he said, at last. "So far the explanation I gave you was all that was necessary; but now that I expect more important services from you, I ought to tell you the whole truth, or at least all I know about the affair. This will prove my great confidence in you." Whereupon, he acquainted Chupin with everything he knew concerning the history of M. de Chalusse, the Marquis de Valorsay, and Mademoiselle Marguerite.

However, if he expected these disclosures to elevate him in his subordinate's estimation he was greatly mistaken. Chupin had sufficient experience and common sense to read his master's character and discern his motives. He saw plainly enough that this honest impulse on M. Fortunat's part came from disappointed avarice and wounded vanity, and that the agent would have allowed the Marquis de Valorsay to carry out his infamous scheme without any compunctions of conscience, providing he, himself, had not been injured by it. Still, the young fellow did not allow his real feelings to appear on his face. First, it was not his business to tell M. Fortunat his opinion of him; and in the second place, he did not deem it an oppor-

tune moment for a declaration of his sentiments. So, when his employer paused, he exclaimed: "Well, we must outwit these scoundrels—for I'll join you, m'sieur; and I flatter myself that I can be very useful to you. Do you want the particulars of the viscount's past life? If so, I can furnish them. I know the brigand. He's married, as I told you before, and I'll find his wife for you in a few days. I don't know exactly where she lives, but she keeps a tobacco store, somewhere, and that's enough. She'll tell you how much he's a viscount. Ha! ha! Viscount just as much as I am—and no more. I can tell you the scrapes he has been in."

"No doubt; but the most important thing is to know how he's living now, and on what!"

"Not by honest work, I can tell you. But give me a little time, and I'll find out for sure. As soon as I can go home, change my clothes, and disguise myself, I'll start after him; and may I be hung, if I don't return with a complete report before Tuesday."

A smile of satisfaction appeared on M. Fortunat's face. "Good, Victor!" he said, approvingly, "very good! I see that you will serve me with your usual zeal and intelligence. Rest assured that you will be rewarded as you have never been rewarded before. As long as you are engaged in this affair, you shall have ten francs a day; and I'll pay your board, your cab-hire, and all your expenses."

This was a most liberal offer, and yet, far from seeming delighted, Chupin gravely shook his head. "You know how I value money, m'sieur," he began.

"To much, Victor, my boy, too much—"

"Excuse me, it's because I have responsibilities, m'sieur. You know my establishment"—he spoke this word with a grandiloquent air—"you have seen my good mother—my expenses are heavy—"

"In short, you don't think I offer you enough?"

"On the contrary, sir—but you don't allow me to finish. I love money, don't I? But no matter, I don't want to be paid for this business. I don't want either my board or my expenses, not a penny—nothing. I'll serve you, but for my own sake, for my own pleasure—gratis."

M. Fortunat could not restrain an exclamation of astonishment. Chupin, who was as eager for gain as an old usurer—Chupin, as grasping as avarice itself, refuse money! This was something which he had never seen before, and which he would no doubt, never see again.

Victor had become very much excited; his usually pale cheeks were crimson, and in a harsh voice, he continued: "It's a fancy of mine—that's all. I have eight hundred francs hidden in my room, the fruit of years of work. I'll spend the last penny of it if need be; and if I can see Coralth in the mire, I shall say, 'My money has been well expended.' I'd rather see that day dawn than be the possessor of a hundred thousand francs. If a horrible vision haunted you every night, and prevented you from sleeping, wouldn't you give something to get rid of it? Very well! that brigand's my nightmare. There must be an end to it."

M. de Coralth, who was a man of wide experience, would certainly have felt alarmed if he had seen his unknown enemy at the present moment, for Victor's eyes, usually a pale and undecided blue, were glittering like steel, and his hands were clinched most threateningly. "For he was the cause of all my trouble," he continued, gloomily. "I've told you, sir, that I was guilty of an infamous deed once upon a time. If it hadn't been for a miracle I should have killed a man—the king of men. Ah, well! if

Monsieur André had broken his back by falling from a fifth-floor window, my Coralth would be the Duc de Champdoce to-day. And shall he be allowed to ride about in his carriage, and deceive and ruin honest people? No—there are too many such villains at large for public safety. Wait a little, Coralth—I owe you something, and I always pay my debts. When M. André saved me, though I richly deserved to have my throat cut, he made no conditions. He only said, 'If you are not irredeemably bad you will be honest after this.' And he said these words as he was lying there as pale as death with his shoulder broken, and his body mangled from his fall. Great heavens! I felt smaller than—than nothing before him. But I swore that I would do honour to his teachings—and when evil thoughts enter my mind, and when I feel a thirst for liquor, I say to myself, 'Wait a bit, and—and M. André will take a glass with you.' And that quenches my thirst instantly. I have his portrait at home, and every night, before going to bed, I tell him the history of the day—and sometimes I fancy that he smiles at me. All this is very absurd, perhaps, but I'm not ashamed of it. M. André and my good mother, they are my supports, my crutches, and with them I'm not afraid of making a false step." Schebel, the German philosopher, who has written a treatise on Volition, in four volumes, was no greater a man than Chupin. "So you may keep your money, sir," he resumed. "I'm an honest fellow, and honest men ought to ask no reward for the performance of a duty. Coralth mustn't be allowed to triumph over the innocent chap he ruined. What did you call him? Ferailleur? It's an odd name. Never mind—we'll get him out of this scrape; he shall marry his sweetheart after all; and I'll dance at the wedding."

As he finished speaking he laughed a shrill, dangerous laugh, which revealed his sharp teeth—but such invincible determination was apparent on his face, that M. Fortunat felt no misgivings. He was sure that this voluntcer would be of more service than the highest-priced hireling. "So I can count on you, Victor?" he inquired.

"As upon yourself."

"And you hope to have some positive information by Tuesday?"

"Before then, I hope, if nothing goes amiss."

"Very well; I will devote my attention to Ferailleur then. As to Valorsay's affairs, I am better acquainted with them than he is himself. We must be prepared to enter upon the campaign when Mademoiselle Marguerite comes, and we will act in accordance with her instructions."

Chupin had already caught up his hat; but just as he was leaving the room, he paused abruptly. "How stupid!" he exclaimed. "I had forgotten the principal thing. Where does Coralth live?"

"Unfortunately, I don't know."

According to his habit when things did not go to his liking, Chupin began to scratch his head furiously. "That's bad," growled he. "Viscounts of his stamp don't parade their addresses in the directory. Still I shall find him." However, although he expressed this conviction he went off decidedly out of temper.

"I shall lose the entire evening hunting up the rascal's address," he grumbled, as he hastened homeward. "And whom shall I ask for it?—Madame d'Argelès' concierge? Would he know it—M. Wilkie's servant? That would be dangerous." He thought of roaming round about M. de Valorsay's residence, and of bribing one of the valets; but while crossing the boulevard, the sight of Brebant's Restauraunt put a new idea into his head. "I have it!" he muttered; "my man's caught!" And he

darted into the nearest café where he ordered some beer and writing materials.

Under other circumstances, he would have hesitated to employ so hazardous an expedient as the one he was about to resort to, but the character of his adversaries justified any course; besides, time was passing, and he had no choice of resources. As soon as the waiter served him, he drained his glass of beer to give himself an inspiration, and then, in his finest hand, he wrote: "My Dear Viscount—Here's the amount—one hundred francs—that I lost to you last evening at *piquet*. When shall I have my revenge?—Your friend, Valorsay."

When he had finished this letter he read it over three or four times, asking himself if this were the style of composition that very fashionable folks employ in repaying their debts. To tell the truth, he doubted it. In the rough draft which he penned at first, he had written bezique, but in the copy he wrote *piquet*, which he deemed a more aristocratic game. "However," said he; "no one will examine it closely!"

Then, as soon as the ink was dry, he folded the letter and slipped it into an envelope with a hundred franc-note which he drew from an old pocket-book. He next addressed the envelope as follows: "Monsieur le Vicomte de Coralth. En Ville," and having completed his preparations, he paid his score, and hastened to Brebant's. Two waiters were standing at the doorway, and, showing them the letter, he politely asked. "Do you happen to know this name? A gentleman dropped this letter on leaving your place last evening. I ran after him to return it; but I couldn't overtake him."

The waiters examined the address. "Coralth!" they replied. "We scarcely know him. He isn't a regular customer, but he comes here occasionally."

"And where does he live?"

"Why do you wish to know?"

"So as to take him this letter, to be sure!"

The waiters shrugged their shoulders. "Let the letter go; it is not worth while to trouble yourself."

Chupin had foreseen this objection, and was prepared for it. "But there's money in the letter," he remonstrated. And opening the envelope, he showed the bank-note which he had taken from his own pocket-book.

This changed the matter entirely. "That is quite a different thing," remarked one of the waiters. "If you find money, you are, of course responsible for it. But just leave it here at the desk, and the next time the viscount comes in, the cashier will give it to him."

A cold chill crept over Chupin at the thought of losing his bank-note in this way. "Ah! I don't fancy that idea!" he exclaimed. "Leave it here? Never in life! Who'd get the reward? A viscount is always generous; it is quite likely he would give me twenty francs as a reward for my honesty. And that's why I want his address."

The argument was of a nature to touch the waiters; they thought the young man quite right; but they did not know M. de Coralth's address, and they saw no way of procuring it. "Unless perhaps the porter knows," observed one of them.

The porter, on being called, remembered that he had once been sent to M. de Coralth's house for an overcoat. "I've forgotten his number," he declared; "but he lives in the Rue d'Anjou, near the corner of the Rue de la Ville l'Evêque."

This direction was not remarkable for its precision, but it was more than sufficient for a pure-blooded Parisian like Victor Chupin. "Many thanks for your kindness," he said to the porter. "A blind man, perhaps, might not be able to go straight to M. de Coralth's house from your directions, but I have eyes and a tongue as well. And, believe me, if there's any reward, you shall see that I know how to repay a good turn."

"And if you don't find the viscount," added the waiters, "bring the money here, and it will be returned to him."

"Naturally!" replied Chupin. And he strode hurriedly away. "Return!" he muttered; "not I! I thought for a moment they had their hands on my precious banknote."

But he had already recovered from his fright, and as he turned his steps homeward he congratulated himself on the success of his stratagem. "For my viscount is caught," he said to himself. "The Rue d'Anjou-Saint Honoré hasn't a hundred numbers in it, and even if I'm compelled to go from door to door, my task will soon be accomplished."

On reaching home he found his mother engaged in knitting, as usual. This was the only avocation that her almost complete blindness allowed her to pursue; and she followed it constantly. "Ah! here you are, Toto," she exclaimed, joyously. "I didn't expect you so soon. Don't you scent a savoury smell? As you must be greatly tired after being up all night, I'm making you a stew."

As customary when he returned, Chupin embraced the good woman with the respectful tenderness which had so greatly surprised M. Fortunat. "You are always kind," said he, "but, unfortunately, I can't remain to dine with you."

"But you promised me."

"That's true, mamma; but business you see—business."

The worthy woman shook her head. "Always business!" she exclaimed.

"Yes—when a fellow hasn't ten thousand francs a year."

"You have become a worker, Toto, and that makes me very happy; but you are too eager for money, and that frightens me."

"That's to say, you fear I shall do something dishonest. Ah! mother! do you think I can forget you and Monsieur André?"

His mother said no more, and he entered the tiny nook which he so pompously styled his chamber, and quickly changed the clothes he was wearing (his Sunday toggery) for an old pair of checked trousers, a black blouse, and a glazed cap. And when he had finished, and given a peculiar turn to his hair, no one would have recognized him. In place of M. Fortunat's respectable clerk, there appeared one of those vagabonds who hang about *cafés* and theatres from six in the evening till midnight, and spend the rest of their time playing cards in the low drinking dens near the *barrières*. It was the old Chupin come to life once more—Toto Chupin as he had appeared before his conversion. And as he took a last look in the little glass hanging over the table, he was himself astonished at the transformation. "Ah!" he muttered, "I was a sorry looking devil in those days."

Although he had cautiously avoided making any noise in dressing, his mother, with the wonderfully acute hearing of the blind, had followed each of his movements as surely as if she had been standing near watching him. "You have changed your clothes, Toto," she remarked.

"Yes, mother."

"But why have you put on your blouse, my son?"

Although accustomed to his mother's remarkable quickness of perception, he was amazed. Still he did not think of denying it. She would only have to extend her hand to prove that he was telling a falsehood. The blind woman's usually placid face had become stern. "So it is necessary to disguise yourself," she said, gravely.

"But, mother—"

"Hush, my son! When a man doesn't wish to be recognised, he's evidently doing something he's ashamed of. Ever since your employer came here, you have been concealing something from me. Take care, Toto! Since I heard that man's voice, I'm sure that he is quite as capable of urging you to commit a crime as others were in days gone by."

The blind woman was preaching to a convert; for during the past three days, M. Fortunat had shown himself in such a light that Chupin had secretly resolved to change his employer. "I promise you I'll leave him, mother," he declared, "so you may be quite easy in mind."

"Very well; but now, at this moment, where are you going?"

There was only one way of completely reassuring the good woman, and that was to tell her all. Chupin did so with absolute frankness. "Ah, well!" she said, when the narrative was finished. "You see now how easy it is to lead you astray! How could you be induced to play the part of a spy, when you know so well what it leads to? It's only God's protecting care that has saved you again from an act which you would have reproached yourself for all your life. Your employer's intentions are good now: but they *were* criminal when he ordered you to follow Madame d'Argelès. Poor woman! She had sacrificed herself for her son, she had concealed herself from him, and you were working to betray her. Poor creature! how she must have suffered, and how much I pity her! To be what she is, and to see herself denounced by her own son! I, who am only a poor plebeian, should die of shame under such circumstances."

Chupin blew his nose so loudly that the window panes rattled; this was his way of repressing his emotion whenever it threatened to overcome him. "You speak like the good mother that you are," he exclaimed at last, "and I'm prouder of you than if you were the handsomest and richest lady in Paris, for you're certainly the most honest and virtuous; and I should be a thorough scoundrel if I caused you a moment's sorrow. And if ever I set my foot in such a mess again, I hope some one will cut it off. But for this once—"

"For this once, you may go, Toto; I give my consent."

He went off with a lighter heart; and on reaching the Rue d'Anjou he immediately began his investigations. They were not successful at first. At every house where he made inquiries nobody had any knowledge of the Viscount de Coralth. He had visited half the buildings in the street, when he reached one of the handsomest houses, in front of which stood a cart laden with plants and flowers. An old man, who seemed to be the concierge, and a valet in a red waistcoat, were removing the plants from the vehicle and arranging them in a line under the *porte cochère*. As soon as the cart was emptied, it drove away, whereupon Chupin stepped forward, and addressing the concierge, asked: "Does the Viscount de Coralth live here?"

"Yes. What do you want with him?

Having foreseen this question, Chupin had prepared a reply. "I certainly don't come to call on him," he answered. "My reason for inquiring is this: just now, as I passed near the Madeleine, a very elegant lady

called me, and said : 'M. de Coralth lives in the Rue d'Anjou, but I've forgotten the number. I can't go about from door to door making inquiries, so if you'll go there and ascertain his address for me, I'll give you five francs for yourself,' so my money's made."

Profiting by his old Parisian experience, Chupin had chosen such a clever excuse that both his listeners heartily laughed. "Well, Father Moulinet," cried the servant in the red waistcoat, "what do you say to that? Are there any elegant ladies who give five francs for *your* address?"

"Is there any lady who's likely to send such flowers as these to *you?*" was the response.

Chupin was about to retire with a bow, when the concierge stopped him. "You accomplish your errands so well that perhaps you'd be willing to take these flower-pots up to the second floor, if we gave you a glass of wine!"

No proposal could have suited Chupin better. Although he was prone to exaggerate his own powers and the fecundity of his resources, he had not flattered himself with the hope that he should succeed in crossing the threshold of M. de Coralth's rooms. For, without any great mental effort, he had realised that the servant arrayed in the red waistcoat was in the viscount's employ, and these flowers were to be carried to his apartments. However any signs of satisfaction would have seemed singular under the circumstances, and so he sulkily replied : "A glass of wine! you had better say two."

"Well, I'll say a whole bottleful, my boy, if that suits you any better," replied the servant, with the charming good nature so often displayed by people who are giving other folk's property away.

"Then I'm at your service!" exclaimed Chupin. And, loading himself with a host of flower-pots as skilfully as if he had been accustomed to handling them all his life, he added ; "Now, lead the way."

The valet and the concierge preceded him with empty hands, of course; and, on reaching the second floor, they opened a door, and said : "This is the place. Come in."

Chupin had expected to find that M. de Coralth's apartments were handsomer than his own in the Faubourg Saint Denis; but he had scarcely imagined such luxury as pervaded this establishment. The chandeliers seemed marvels in his eyes ; and the sumptuous chairs and couches eclipsed M. Fortunat's wonderful sofa completely. "So he no longer amuses himself with petty rascalities," thought Chupin, as he surveyed the rooms. "Monsieur's working on a grand scale now. Decidedly this mustn't be allowed to continue."

Thereupon he busied himself placing the flowers in the numerous jardinières scattered about the rooms, as well as in a tiny conservatory, cleverly contrived on the balcony, and adjoining a little apartment with silk hangings, that was used as a smoking-room. Under the surveillance of the concierge and the valet he was allowed to visit the whole apartments. He admired the drawing-room, filled to overflowing with costly trifles; the dining-room, furnished in old oak ; the luxurious bed-room with its bed mounted upon a platform, as if it were a throne, and the library filled with richly bound volumes. Everything was beautiful, sumptuous and magnificent, and Chupin admired, though he did not envy, this luxury. He said to himself that, if ever he became rich, his establishment should be quite different. He would have preferred rather more simplicity, a trifle less satin, velvet, hangings, mirrors and gilding. Still this did not prevent him from going

into ecstasies over each room he entered: and he expressed his admiration so artlessly that the valet feeling as much flattered as if he were the owner of the place, took a sort of pride in exhibiting everything.

He showed Chupin the target which the viscount practised at with pistols for an hour every morning; for Monsieur le Vicomte was a capital marksman, and could lodge eight balls out of ten in the neck of a bottle at a distance of twenty paces. He also displayed his master's swords; for Monsieur le Vicomte handled side arms as adroitly as pistols. He took a lesson every day from one of the best fencing-masters in Paris; and his duels had always terminated fortunately. He also showed the viscount's blue velvet dressing-gown, his fur trimmed slippers, and even his elaborately embroidered night-shirts. But it was the dressing-room that most astonished and stupefied Chupin. He stood gazing in open-mouthed wonder at the immense white marble table, with its water spigots and its basins, its sponges and boxes, its pots and vials and cups; and he counted the brushes by the dozen—brushes hard and soft, brushes for the hair, for the beard, for the hands, and the application of cosmetic to the moustaches and eyebrows. Never had he seen in one collection such a variety of steel and silver instruments, knives, pincers, scissors, and files. "One might think oneself in a chiropodist's, or a dentist's establishment," remarked Chupin to the servant. "Does your master use all these every day?"

"Certainly, or rather twice a day—morning and evening—at his toilette."

Chupin expressed his feelings with a grimace and an exclamation of mocking wonder. "Ah, well! he must have a clean skin," he said.

His listeners laughed heartily; and the concierge, after exchanging a significant glance with the valet, said *sotto voce*, "Zounds! it's his business to be a handsome fellow!" The mystery was solved.

While Chupin changed the contents of the jardinières, and remained upstairs in the intervals between the nine or ten journeys he made to the *porte-cochère* for more flowers, he listened attentively to the conversation between the concierge and the valet, and heard snatches of sentences that enlightened him wonderfully. Moreover, whenever a question arose as to placing a plant in one place rather than another, the valet stated as a conclusive argument that the baroness liked it in such or such a place, or that she would be better pleased with this or that arrangement, or that he must comply with the instructions she had given him. Chupin was therefore obliged to conclude that the flowers had been sent here by a baroness who possessed certain rights in the establishment. But who was she?

He was manœuvering very cleverly in the hope of ascertaining this point, when a carriage was heard driving into the courtyard below. "Monsieur must have returned!" exclaimed the valet, darting to the window.

Chupin also ran to look out, and saw a very elegant blue-lined brougham, drawn by a superb horse, but he did not perceive the viscount. In point of fact, M. de Coralth was already climbing the stairs, four at a time, and, a moment later, he entered the room, angrily exclaiming, "Florent, what does this mean? Why have you left all the doors open?"

Florent was the servant in the red waistcoat. He slightly shrugged his shoulders like a servant who knows too many of his master's secrets to have anything to fear, and in the calmest possible tone replied, "If the doors are open, it is only because the baroness has just sent some flowers. On Sunday, too, what a funny idea! And I have been treating Father Moulinet and this worthy fellow" (pointing to Chupin) "to a glass of wine, to acknowledge their kindness in assisting me."

Fearing recognition, Chupin hid his face as much as possible; but M. de Coralth did not pay the slightest attention to him. There was a dark frown on his handsome, usually smiling countenance, and his hair was in great disorder. Evidently enough, something had greatly annoyed him. "I am going out again," he remarked to his valet, "but first of all I must write two letters which you must deliver immediately."

He passed into the drawing-room as he spoke, and Florent scarcely waited till the door was closed before uttering an oath. "May the devil take him!" he exclaimed. "Here he sets me on the go again. It is five o'clock, too, and I have an appointment in half an hour."

A sudden hope quickened the throbbings of Chupin's heart. He touched the valet's arm, and in his most persuasive tone remarked: "I've nothing to do, and as your wine was so good, I'll do your errands for you, if you'll pay me for the wear and tear of shoe-leather."

Chupin's appearance must have inspired confidence, for the servant replied:—"Well—I don't refuse—but we'll see."

The viscount did not spend much time in writing; he speedily reappeared holding two letters which he flung upon the table, saying:—"One of these is for the baroness. You must deliver it into *her* hands or into the hands of her maid—there will be no answer. You will afterwards take the other to the person it is addressed to, and you must wait for an answer which you will place on my writing table—and make haste." So saying, the viscount went off as he had entered—on the run—and a moment later, his brougham was heard rolling out of the courtyard.

Florent was crimson with rage. "There," said he, addressing Chupin rather than the concierge, "what did I tell you? A letter to be placed in madame's own hands or in the hands of her maid, and to be concealed from the baron, who is on the watch, of course. Naturally no one can execute that commission but myself."

"That's true!" replied Chupin; "but how about the other?"

The valet had not yet examined the second letter. He now took it from the table, and glanced at the address. "Ah," said he, "I can confide this one to you, my good fellow, and it's very fortunate, for it is to be taken to a place on the other side of the river. Upon my word! masters are strange creatures! You manage your work so as to have a little leisure, and the moment you think yourself free, pouf!—they send you anywhere in creation without even asking if it suits your convenience. If it hadn't been for you, I should have missed a dinner with some very charming ladies. But, above all, don't loiter on the way. I don't mind paying your omnibus fare if you like. And you heard him say there would be an answer. You can give it to Moulinet, and in exchange, he'll give you fifteen sous for your trouble, and six sous for your omnibus fare. Besides, if you can extract anything from the party the letter's intended for, you are quite welcome to it."

"Agreed, sir! Grant me time enough to give an answer to the lady who is waiting at the Madeleine, and I'm on my way. Give me the letter."

"Here it is," said the valet, handing it to Chupin. But as the latter glanced at the address he turned deadly pale, and his eyes almost started from their sockets. For this is what he read: "Madame Paul. Dealer in Tobacco. Quai de la Seine." Great as was his self-control, his emotion was too evident to escape notice. "What's the matter with you?" asked the concierge and the valet in the same breath. "What has happened to you?"

A powerful effort of will restored this young fellow's coolness, and ready in an instant with an excuse for his blunder, he replied, "I have changed my mind. What! you'd only give me fifteen sous to measure such a distance as that! Why, it isn't a walk—it's a journey!"

His explanation was accepted without demur. His listeners thought he was only taking advantage of the need they had of his services—as was perfectly natural under the circumstances. "What! So you are dissatisfied!" cried the valet. "Very well! you shall have thirty sous—but be off!"

"So I will, at once," replied Chupin. And, imitating the whistle of a locomotive with wonderful perfection, he darted away at a pace which augured a speedy return.

However, when he was some twenty yards from the house he stopped short, glanced around him, and espying a dark corner slipped into it. "That fool in the red waistcoat will be coming out to take the letter to that famous baroness," he thought. "I'm here, and I'll watch him and see where he goes. I should like to find out the name of the kind and charitable lady who watches over his brigand of a master with such tender care."

The day and the hour were in his favour. Night was coming on, hastened by a thick fog; the street lamps were not yet lighted, and as it was Sunday most of the shops were closed. It grew dark so rapidly that Chupin was scarcely able to recognise Florent when he at last emerged from the house. It is true that he looked altogether unlike the servant in the red waistcoat. As he had the key to the wardrobe containing his master's clothes, he did not hesitate to use them whenever an opportunity offered. On this occasion he had appropriated a pair of those delicately-tinted trousers which were M. de Coralth's specialty, with a handsome overcoat, a trifle too small for him, and a very elegant hat.

"Fine doings, indeed!" growled Chupin as he started in pursuit. "My servants sha'n't serve me in that way if I ever have any."

But he paused in his soliloquy, and prudently hid himself under a neighbouring gateway. The gorgeous Florent was ringing at the door of one of the most magnificent mansions in the Rue de la Ville l'Evèque. The door was opened, and he went in. "Ah! ah!" thought Chupin, "he hadn't far to go. The viscount and the baroness are shrewd. When you have flowers to send to anybody it's convenient to be neighbours!"

He glanced round, and seeing an old man smoking his pipe on the threshold of a shop, he approached him and asked politely: "Can you tell me whom that big house belongs to?"

"To Baron Trigault," replied the man, without releasing his hold on his pipe.

"Thank you, monsieur," replied Chupin, gravely. "I inquired, because I think of buying a house—" And repeating the name of Trigault several times to impress it upon his memory he darted off on his errand.

It might be supposed that his unexpected success had delighted him, but, on the contrary, it rendered him even more exacting. The letter he carried burned his pocket like a red hot iron. "Madame Paul," he muttered, "that must be the rascal's wife. First, Paul is his Christian name; secondly, I've been told that his wife keeps a tobacco shop—so the case is plain. But the strangest thing about it is that this husband and wife, should write to each other, when I fancied them at dagger's ends." Chupin would have given a pint of his own blood to know the contents of the missive. The idea of opening it occurred to him, and it must be confessed that

it was not a feeling of delicacy that prevented him. He was deterred by a large seal which had been carefully affixed, and which would plainly furnish evidence if the letter were tampered with. Thus Chupin was punished for Florent's faults, for this seal was the viscount's invariable precaution against his servant's prying curiosity. So our enterprising youth could only read and re-read the superscription and smell the paper, which was strongly scented with verbena. He fancied that there was some mysterious connection between this letter intended for M. de Coralth's wife and the missive sent to the baroness. And why should it not be so? Had they not both been written under the influence of anger? Still he failed to perceive any possible connection between the rich baroness and the poor tobacco dealer and his cogitations only made him more perplexed than ever. However, his efforts to solve the mystery did not interfere with the free use of his limbs, and he soon found himself on the Quai de la Seine. "Here I am," he muttered. "I've come more quickly than an omnibus."

The Quai de la Seine is a broad road, connecting the Rue de Flandres with the canal de l'Ourcq. On the left-hand side it is bordered with miserable shanties interspersed with some tiny shops, and several huge coal dépôts. On the right-hand side—that next to the canal—there are also a few provision stores. In the daytime there is no noisier nor livelier place than this same Quai; but nothing could be more gloomy at night-time when the shops are closed, when the few gas-lamps only increase the grimness of the shadows, and when the only sound that breaks the silence is the rippling of the water as its smooth surface is ruffled by some boatman propelling his skiff through the canal.

"The viscount must certainly have made a mistake," thought Chupin; "there is no such shop on the Quai." He was wrong, however; for after passing the Rue de Soissons he espied the red lantern of a tobacco-shop, glimmering through the fog.

XI.

Having almost reached the goal, Chupin slackened his pace. He approached the shop very cautiously and peered inside, deeming it prudent to reconnoitre a little before he went in. And certainly there was nothing to prevent a prolonged scrutiny. The night was very dark, the quay deserted. No one was to be seen; not a sound broke the stillness. The darkness, the surroundings, and the silence were sinister enough to make even Chupin shudder, though he was usually as thoroughly at home in the loneliest and most dangerous by-ways of Paris as an honest man of the middle classes would be in the different apartments of his modest household. "That scoundrel's wife must have less than a hundred thousand a year if she takes up her abode here!" thought Chupin.

And, in fact, nothing could be more repulsive than the tenement in which Madame Paul had installed herself. It was but one storey high, and built of clay, and it had fallen to ruin to such an extent that it had been found necessary to prop it up with timber, and to nail some old boards over the yawning fissures in the walls. "If I lived here, I certainly shouldn't feel quite at ease on a windy day," continued Chupin, *sotto voce*.

The shop itself was of a fair size, but most wretched in its appointments, and disgustingly dirty. The floor was covered with that black and glutinous coal-dust which forms the soil of the Quai de la Seine. An auctioneer would have sold the entire stock and fixtures for a few shillings. Four stone jars,

and a couple of pairs of scales, a few odd tumblers, filled with pipes and packets of cigarettes, some wine-glasses, and three or four labelled bottles, five or six boxes of cigars, and as many packages of musty tobacco, constituted the entire stock in trade.

As Chupin compared this vile den with the viscount's luxurious abode, his blood fairly boiled in his veins. "He ought to be shot for this, if for nothing else," he muttered through his set teeth. "To let his wife die of starvation here!" For it was M. de Coralth's wife who kept this shop. Chupin, who had seen her years before, recognised her now as she sat behind her counter, although she was cruelly changed. "That's her," he murmured. "That's certainly Mademoiselle Flavie."*

He had used her maiden name in speaking of her. Poor woman! She was undoubtedly still young—but sorrow, regret, and privations, days spent in hard work to earn a miserable subsistence, and nights spent in weeping, had made her old, haggard, and wrinkled before her time. Of her once remarkable beauty nought remained but her hair, which was still magnificent, though it was in wild disorder, and looked as if it had not been touched by a comb for weeks; and her big black eyes, which gleamed with the phosphorescent and destructive brilliancy of fever. Everything about her person bespoke terrible reverses, borne without dignity. Even if she had struggled at first, it was easy to see that she struggled no longer. Her attire—her torn and soiled silk dress, and her dirty cap—revealed thorough indolence, and that morbid indifference which at times follows great misfortunes with weak natures.

"Such is life," thought Chupin, philosophically. "Here's a girl who was brought up like a queen and allowed to have her own way in everything! If any one had predicted this in those days, how she would have sneered! I can see her now as she looked that day when I met her driving her grey ponies. If people didn't clear the road it was so much the worse for them! In those times Paris was like some great shop where she could select whatever she chose. She said: 'I want this,' and she got it. She saw a handsome young fellow and wanted him for her husband: her father, who could refuse her nothing, consented, and now behold the result!"

He had lingered longer at the window than he had meant to do, perhaps because he could see that the young woman was talking with some person in a back room, the door of which stood open. Chupin tried to find out who this person was, but he did not succeed; and he was about to go in when suddenly he saw Madame Paul rise from her seat and say a few words with an air of displeasure. And this time her eyes, instead of turning to the open door, were fixed on a part of the shop directly opposite her. "Is there some one there as well then?" Chupin wondered.

He changed his post of observation, and, by standing on tiptoe, he succeeded in distinguishing a puny little boy, some three or four years old, and clad in rags, who was playing with the remnants of a toy-horse. The sight of this child increased Chupin's indignation. "So there's a child?" he growled. "The rascal not only deserts his wife, but he leaves his child to starve! We may as well make a note of that: and when we settle up our accounts, he shall pay dearly for his villainy." With this threat he brusquely entered the shop.

"What do you wish, sir?" asked the woman.

"Nothing; I bring you a letter, madame."

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* "The Slaves of Paris," by Emile Gaboriau.

"A letter for me! You must be mistaken."

"Excuse me; are'nt you Madame Paul?"

"Yes."

"Then this is for you." And he handed her the missive which Florent had confided to his care.

Madame Paul took hold of it with some hesitation, eyeing the messenger suspiciously meanwhile; but, on seeing the handwriting, she uttered a cry of surprise. And, turning towards the open door, she called, "M. Mouchon! M. Mouchon! It's from him—it's from my husband; from Paul. Come, come!"

A bald-headed corpulent man, who looked some fifty years of age, now timidly emerged from the room behind the shop with a cap in his hand. "Ah, well! my dear child," he said, in an oily voice, "what was I telling you just now? Everything comes to those who know how to wait."

However she had already broken the seal, and she was now reading the letter eagerly, clapping her hands with delight as she finished its perusal. "He consents!" she exclaimed. "He's frightened—he begs me to wait a little—look—read!"

But M. Mouchon could not read without his spectacles, and he lost at least two minutes in searching his pockets before he found them. And when they were adjusted, the light was so dim that it took him at least three minutes more to decipher the missive. Chupin had spent this time in scrutinizing—in appraising the man, as it were. "What is this venerable gentleman doing here?" he thought. "He's a middle class man, that's evident from his linen. "He's married—there's a wedding-ring on his finger; he has a daughter, for the ends of his necktie are embroidered. He lives in the neighbourhood, for, well dressed as he is, he wears a cap. But what was he doing there in that back room in the dark?"

Meanwhile M. Mouchon had finished reading the letter. "What did I tell you?" he said complacently.

"Yes, you were right!" answered Madame Paul as she took up the letter and read it again with her eyes sparkling with joy. "And now what shall I do?" she asked. "Wait, shall I not?"

"No, no!" exclaimed the elderly gentleman, in evident dismay. "You must strike the iron while it's hot."

"But he promises me—"

"To promise and to keep one's promises are two different things."

"He wants a reply."

"Tell him—" But he stopped short, calling her attention with a gesture to the messenger, whose eyes were glittering with intense curiosity.

She understood. So filling a glass with some liquor, she placed it before Chupin, and offered him a cigar, saying: "Take a seat—here's something to keep you from feeling impatient while you wait here." Thereupon she followed the old gentleman into the adjoining room, and closed the door.

Even if Chupin had not possessed the precocious penetration he owed to his life of adventure, the young woman and the old gentleman had said enough to enable him to form a correct estimate of the situation. He was certain now that he knew the contents of the letter as perfectly as if he had read it. M. de Coralth's anger, and his order to make haste, were both explained. Moreover, Chupin distinctly saw what connection there was between the letter to the baroness and the letter to Madame Paul. He understood that one was the natural consequence of the other. Deserted by her husband, Madame Paul had at last become weary of poverty and

privations. She had instituted a search for her husband, and, having found him, she had written to him in this style: "I consent to abstain from interfering with you, but only on conditions that you provide means of subsistence for me, your lawfully wedded wife, and for your child. If you refuse, I shall urge my claims, and ruin you. The scandal won't be of much use to me, it's true, but at least I shall no longer be obliged to endure the torture of knowing that you are surrounded by every luxury while I am dying of starvation."

Yes, she had evidently written that. It might not be the precise text; but no doubt it was the purport of her letter. On receiving it, Coralth had become alarmed. He knew only too well that if his wife made herself known and revealed his past, it would be all over with him. But he had no money. Charming young men like the Viscount de Coralth never have any money on hand. So, in this emergency, the dashing young fellow had written to his wife imploring her to have patience, and to the baroness, entreating, or rather commanding, her to advance him a certain sum at once.

This was no doubt the case, and yet there was one circumstance which puzzled Chupin exceedingly. In former years, he had heard it asserted that Mademoiselle Flavie was the very personification of pride, and that she adored her husband even to madness. Had this great love vanished? Had poverty and sorrow broken her spirit to such a degree that she was willing to stoop to such shameful concessions! If she were acquainted with her husband's present life, how did it happen that she did not prefer starvation, or the alms-house and a pauper's grave to his assistance? Chupin could understand how, in a moment of passion, she might be driven to denounce her husband in the presence of his fashionable acquaintances, how she might be impelled to ruin him so as to avenge herself; but he could not possibly understand how she could consent to profit by the ignominy of the man she loved. "The plan isn't hers," said Chupin to himself, after a moment's reflection. "It's probably the work of that stout old gentleman."

There was a means of verifying his suspicions, for on returning into the adjoining room, Madame Paul had not taken her son with her. He was still sitting on the muddy floor of the shop, playing with his dilapidated horse. Chupin called him. "Come here, my little fellow," said he.

The child rose, and timidly approached, his eyes dilating with distrust and astonishment. The poor boy's repulsive uncleanliness was a terrible charge against the mother. Did she no longer love her own offspring? The untidiness of sorrow and poverty has its bounds. A long time must have passed since the child's face and hands had been washed, and his soiled clothes were literally falling to rags. Still, he was a handsome little fellow, and seemed fairly intelligent, in spite of his bashfulness. He was very light haired, and in features he was extremely like M. de Coralth. Chupin took him on his knees, and, after looking to see if the door communicating with the inner room were securely closed, he asked: "What's your name, little chap?"

"Paul."

"Do you know your father?"

"No."

"Doesn't your mother ever talk to you about him?"

"Oh, yes!"

"And what does she say?"

"That he's rich—very rich."

"And what else?"

The child did not reply; perhaps his mother had forbidden him to say anything on the subject—perhaps that instinct which precedes intelligence, just as the dawn precedes daylight, warned him to be prudent with a stranger. "Doesn't your papa ever come to see you?" insisted Chupin.

"Never."

"Why?"

"Mamma is very poor."

"And wouldn't you like to go and see him?"

"I don't know. But he'll come some day, and take us away with him to a large house. We shall be all right, then: and he will give us a deal of money and pretty dresses, and I shall have plenty of toys."

Satisfied on this point, Chupin pushed his investigations farther. "And do you know this old gentleman who is with your mamma in the other room?"

"Oh, yes!—that's Mouchon."

"And who's Mouchon?"

"He's the gentleman who owns that beautiful garden at the corner of the Rue Riquet, where there are such splendid grapes. I'm going with him to get some."

"Does he often come to see you?"

"Every evening. He always has goodies in his pocket for mamma and me."

"Why does he sit in that back room without any light?"

"Oh, he says that the customers mustn't see him."

It would have been an abominable act to continue this examination, and make this child the innocent accuser of his own mother. Chupin felt conscience-smitten even now. So he kissed the cleanest spot he could find on the boy's face, and set him on the floor again, saying, "Go and play."

The child had revealed his mother's character with cruel precision. What had she told him about his father? That he was rich, and that, in case he returned, he would give them plenty of money and fine clothes. The woman's nature stood revealed in all its deformity. Chupin had good cause to feel proud of his discernment—all his suppositions had been confirmed. He had read Mouchon's character at a glance. He had recognised him as one of those wily evil-minded men who employ their leisure to the profit of their depravity—one of those patient, cold-blooded hypocrites who make poverty their purveyor, and whose passion is prodigal only in advice. "So he's paying his court to Madame Paul," thought Chupin. "Isn't it shameful? The old villain! he might at least give her enough to eat!"

So far his preoccupation had made him forget his wine and his cigar. He emptied the glass at a single draught, but it proved far more difficult to light the cigar. "Zounds! this is a non-conbustible," he growled. "When I arrive at smoking ten sous cigars, I sha'n't come here to buy them."

However, with the help of several matches and a great deal of drawing, he had almost succeeded, when the door opened, and Madame Paul reappeared with a letter in her hand. She seemed greatly agitated; her anxiety was unmistakeable. "I can't decide," she was saying to Mouchon, whose figure Chupin could only dimly distinguish in the darkness. "No I can't. If I send this letter, I must forever renounce all hope of my husband's return. Whatever happens, he will never forgive me."

"He can't treat you worse than he does now, at all events, replied the old gentleman. Besides, a gloved cat has never caught a mouse yet."

"He'll hate me."

"The man who wants his dog to love him, beats it; and, besides, when the wine is drawn, one must drink it."

This singular logic seemed to decide her. She handed the letter to Chupin, and drawing a franc from her pocket she offered it to him. "This is for your trouble," she said.

He involuntarily held out his hand to take the money, but quickly withdrew it, exclaiming: "No, thank you; keep it. I've been paid already." And, thereupon, he left the shop.

Chupin's mother—his poor good mother, as he called her—would certainly have felt proud and delighted at her son's disinterestedness. That very morning, he had refused the ten francs a day that M. Fortunat had offered him, and this evening he declined the twenty sous proffered him by Madame Paul. This was apparently a trifle, and yet in reality it was something marvellous, unprecedented, on the part of this poor lad, who, having neither trade nor profession, was obliged to earn his daily bread through the medium of those chance opportunities which the lower classes of Paris are continually seeking. As he returned to the Rue de Flandres, he muttered: "Take twenty sous from that poor creature, who hasn't had enough to satisfy her hunger for heaven knows how long! That would be altogether unworthy of a man."

It is only just to say that money had never given him a feeling of satisfaction at all comparable with that which he now experienced. He was impressed, too, with a sense of vastly-increased importance on thinking that all the faculties, and all the energy he had once employed in the service of evil, were now consecrated to the service of good. By becoming the instrument of Pascal Ferailleur's salvation he would, in some measure, atone for the crime he had committed years before.

Chupin's mind was so busily occupied with these thoughts that he reached the Rue d'Anjou and M. de Coralth's house almost before he was aware of it. To his great surprise, the concierge and his wife were not alone. Florent was there, taking coffee with them. The valet had divested himself of his borrowed finery, and had donned his red waistcoat again. He seemed to be in a savage humour; and his anger was not at all strange under the circumstances. There was but a step from M. de Coralth's house to the baroness's residence, but fatalities may attend even a step! The baroness, on receiving the letter from her maid, had sent a message to Florent requesting him to wait, as she desired to speak with him! and she had been so inconsiderate as to keep him waiting for more than an hour so that he had missed his appointment with the charming ladies he had spoken of. In his despair he had returned home to seek consolation in the society of his friend the concierge. "Have you the answer?" he asked.

"Yes, here it is," replied Chupin, and Florent had just slipped the letter into his pocket, and was engaged in counting out the thirty sous which he had promised his messenger, when the familiar cry, "Open, please," was heard outside.

M. de Coralth had returned. He sprang to the ground as soon as the carriage entered the courtyard, and on perceiving his servant, he exclaimed: "Have you executed my commissions?"

"They have been executed, monsieur."

"Did you see the baroness?"

"She made me wait two hours to tell me that the viscount need not be worried in the least; that she would certainly be able to comply with his request to-morrow."

M. de Coralth seemed to breathe more freely. "And the other party?" he inquired.

"Gave me this for monsieur."

The viscount seized the missive, with an eager hand, tore it open, read it at one glance, and flew into such a paroxysm of passion that he quite forgot those around him, and began to tear the letter, and utter a string of oaths which would have astonished a cab-driver. But suddenly realising his imprudence, he mastered his rage, and exclaimed, with a forced laugh: "Ah! these women! they are enough to drive one mad!" And deeming this a sufficient explanation, he added, addressing Florent: "Come and undress me; I must be up early to-morrow morning."

This remark was not lost upon Chupin, and at seven o'clock the next morning he mounted guard at M. de Coralth's door. All through the day he followed the viscount about, first to the Marquis de Valorsay's, then to the office of a business agent, then to M. Wilkie's, then, in the afternoon, to Baroness Trigault's, and finally, in the evening, to the house of Madame d'Argelès. Here, by making himself useful to the servants, by his zeal in opening and shutting the doors of the carriages that left the house, he succeeded in gathering some information concerning the frightful scene which had taken place between the mother and the son. He perceived M. Wilkie leave the house with his clothes in disorder, and subsequently he saw the viscount emerge. He followed him, first to the house of the Marquis de Valorsay, and afterwards to M. Wilkie's rooms, where he remained till nearly daybreak.

Thus, when Chupin presented himself in M. Fortunat's office at two o'clock on the Tuesday afternoon, he felt that he held every possible clue to the shameful intrigue which would ruin the viscount as soon as it was made public.

M. Fortunat knew that his agent was shrewd, but he had not done justice to his abilities; and it was, indeed, with something very like envy that he listened to Chupin's clear and circumstantial report. "I have not been as successful," he remarked, when Chupin's story was ended. But he had not time to explain how or why, for just as he was about to do so, Madame Dodelin appeared, and announced that the young lady he expected was there. "Let her come in!" exclaimed M. Fortunat, eagerly—"let her come in!"

Mademoiselle Marguerite had not been compelled to resort to any subterfuge to make her escape from Madame de Fondège's house. The General had decamped early in the morning to try his horses and his carriages, announcing, moreover, that he would breakfast at the club. And as soon as her breakfast was concluded, Madame de Fondège had hurried off to her dressmaker's, warning the household that she would not return before dinner time. A little while later, Madame Léon had suddenly remembered that her noble relative would certainly be expecting a visit from her, and so she dressed herself in haste, and went off, first to Dr. Jodon's and thence to the Marquis de Valorsay's.

Thus, Mademoiselle Marguerite had been able to make her escape without attracting anyone's attention, and she would be able to remain away as many hours as she chose, since the servants would not know how long she had been absent even if they saw her when she returned. An empty cab was passing as she left the house, so she hailed it and got in. The step she was about to take cost her a terrible effort. It was a difficult task for her, a girl naturally so reserved, to confide in a stranger, and open to him her maidenly heart, filled with love for Pascal Ferailleur! Still, she was much

calmer than she had been on the previous evening, when she called on the photographer for a fac-simile of M. de Valorsay's letter. Several circumstances combined to reassure her. M. Fortunat knew her already, since he was the agent whom the Count de Chalusse had employed to carry on the investigations which had resulted in her discovery at the foundling asylum. A vague presentiment told her that this man was better acquainted with her past life than she was herself, and that he could, if he chose, tell her her mother's name—the name of the woman whom the count so dreaded, and who had so pitilessly deserted her. However, her heart beat more quickly, and she felt that she was turning pale when, at Madame Dodelin's invitation, she at last entered M. Fortunat's private office. She took in the room and its occupants with a single glance. The handsome appointments of the office surprised her, for she had expected to see a den. The agent's polite manner and rather elegant appearance disconcerted her, for she had expected to meet a coarse and illiterate boor; and finally, Victor Chupin, who was standing twisting his cap near the fire-place, attired in a blouse and a pair of ragged trousers, fairly alarmed her. Still, no sign of her agitation was perceptible on her countenance. Not a muscle of her beautiful, proud face moved—her glance remained clear and haughty, and she exclaimed in a ringing voice: "I am the late Count de Chalusse's ward, Mademoiselle Marguerite. You have received my letter, I suppose?"

M. Fortunat bowed with all the grace of manner he was wont to display in the circles where he went wife-hunting, and with a somewhat pretentious gesture he advanced an arm-chair, and asked his visitor to sit down. "Your letter reached me, mademoiselle," he replied, "and I was expecting you—flattered and honoured beyond expression by your confidence. My door, indeed, was closed to any one but you."

Marguerite took the proffered seat, and there was a moment's silence. M. Fortunat found it difficult to believe that this beautiful, imposing young girl could be the poor little apprentice whom he had seen in the bookbindery, years before, clad in a coarse serge frock, with dishevelled hair covered with scraps of paper. In the meantime, Marguerite was regretting the necessity of confiding in this man, for the more she looked at him, the more she was convinced that he was not an honest, straightforward person; and she would infinitely have preferred a cynical scoundrel to this plausible and polite gentleman, whom she strongly suspected of being a hypocrite. She remained silent, waiting for M. Fortunat to dismiss the young man in the blouse, whose presence she could not explain, and who stood in a sort of mute ecstasy, staring at her with eyes expressive of the most intense surprise and the liveliest admiration. But weary at last of this fruitless delay, she exclaimed: "I have come, monsieur, to confer with you respecting certain matters which require the most profound secrecy."

Chupin understood her, for he blushed to the tips of his ears, and started as if to leave the room. But his employer detained him with a gesture.

"Remain, Victor," he said kindly, and, turning to Mademoiselle Marguerite, he added: "You have no indiscretion to fear from this worthy fellow, mademoiselle. He knows everything, and he has already been actively at work—and with the best result—on your behalf."

"I don't understand you, sir," replied the girl.

M. Fortunat smiled sweetly. "I have already taken your business in hand, mademoiselle," said he. "An hour after the receipt of your letter I began the campaign."

"But I had not told you—"

"What you wished of me—that's true. But I allowed myself to suspect—"

"Ah!"

"I fancied I might conclude that you wished the help of my experience and poor ability in clearing an innocent man who has been vilely slandered, M. Pascal Ferailleur."

Marguerite sprang to her feet, at once agitated and alarmed. "How did you know this?" she exclaimed.

M. Fortunat had left his arm-chair, and was now leaning against the mantel-shelf, in what he considered a most becoming and awe-inspiring attitude, with his thumb in the arm-hole of his waistcoat. "Ah! nothing could be more simple," he answered, in much the same tone as a conqueror might assume to explain his feat. "It is part of my profession to penetrate the intentions of persons who deign to honour me with their confidence. So my surmises are correct; at least you have not said the contrary?"

She had said nothing. When her first surprise was over, she vainly endeavoured to find a plausible explanation of M. Fortunat's acquaintance with her affairs, for she was not at all deceived by his pretended perspicacity. Meanwhile, delighted by the supposed effect he had produced, he recklessly continued: "Reserve your amazement for what I am about to disclose, for I have made several important discoveries. It must have been your good angel who inspired you with the idea of coming to me. You would have shuddered if you had realised the dangers that threatened you. But now you have nothing to fear; I am watching. I am here, and I hold in my hand all the threads of the abominable intrigue for ruining you. For it is you, your person, and your fortune that are imperilled. It was solely on your account that M. Ferailleur was attacked. And I can tell you the names of the scoundrels who ruined him. The crime originated with the person who had the most powerful interest in the matter—the Marquis de Valorsay. His agent was a scoundrel who is generally known as the Viscount de Coralth; but Chupin here can tell you his real name and his shameful past. You preferred M. Ferailleur, hence it was necessary to put him out of the way. M. de Chalusse had promised your hand to the Marquis de Valorsay. This marriage was Valorsay's only resource—the plank that might save the drowning man. People fancy he is rich; but he is ruined. Yes, ruined completely, irretrievably. He was in such desperate straits that he had almost determined to blow his brains out before the hope of marrying you entered his mind."

"Ah!" thought Chupin, "my employer is well under way."

This was indeed the case. The name of Valorsay was quite sufficient to set all M. Fortunat's bile in motion. All thought of his ex-client irritated him beyond endurance. Unfortunately for him, however, his anger in the present instance had ruined his plans. He had intended to take Mademoiselle Marguerite by surprise, to work upon her imagination, to make her talk without saying anything himself, and to remain master of the situation. But on the contrary he had revealed everything; and he did not discover this until it was too late to retrieve his blunder. "How the Marquis de Valorsay has kept his head above water is a wonder to me," he continued. "His creditors have been threatening to sue him for more than six months. How he has been able to keep them quiet since M. de Chalusse's death, I cannot understand. However, this much is certain, mademoiselle: the marquis has not renounced his intention of becoming your husband; and to attain that object he won't hesitate to employ any means that may promise to prove effectual."

Completely mistress of herself, Mademoiselle Marguerite listened with an impassive face. "I know all this," she replied, in a frigid tone.

"What! you know—"

"Yes; but there is one thing that baffles my powers of comprehension. My dowry was the only temptation to M. de Valorsay, was it not? Why does he still wish to marry me, now that I have no fortune?"

M. Fortunat had gradually lost all his advantage. "I have asked myself the same question," he replied, "and I think I have found an answer. I believe that the marquis has in his possession a letter, or a will, or a document of some sort, written by M. de Chalusse—in fact an instrument in which the count acknowledges you as his daughter, and which consequently establishes your right to his property."

"And the marquis could urge this claim if he became my husband?"

"Certainly he could."

M. Fortunat explained M. de Valorsay's conduct exactly as the old magistrate had done. However, Mademoiselle Marguerite discreetly refrained from committing herself. The great interest that M. Fortunat seemed to take in her affairs aroused her distrust; and she decided to do what he had attempted in vain—that is, allow him to do all the talking, and to conceal all that she knew herself. "Perhaps you are right," she remarked, "but it is necessary to prove the truth of your assertion."

"I can prove that Valorsay hasn't a shilling, and that he has lived for a year by expedients which render him liable to arrest and prosecution at any time. I can prove that he deceived M. de Chalusse as to his financial position. I can prove that he conspired with M. de Coralth to ruin your lover. Wouldn't this be something?"

She smiled in a way that was exceedingly irritating to his vanity, and in a tone of good-natured incredulity, she remarked: "It is easy to *say* these things."

"And to do them," rejoined M. Fortunat, quickly. "I never promise what I cannot perform. A man should never touch a pen when he is meditating any evil act. Of course, no one is fool enough to write down his infamy in detail. But a man cannot always be on the *qui vive*. There will be a word in one letter, a sentence in another, an allusion in a third. And by combining these words, phrases, and allusions, one may finally discover the truth."

He suddenly checked himself, warned of his fresh imprudence by the expression on Mademoiselle Marguerite's face. She drew back, and looking him full in the eyes, she exclaimed: "Then you have been in M. de Valorsay's confidence, sir? Would you be willing to swear that you never helped him in his designs?"

A silent and ignored witness of this scene, Victor Chupin was secretly delighted. "Hit!" he thought—"hit just in the bull's eye. Zounds! there's a woman for you! She has beaten the guv'nor on every point."

M. Fortunat was so taken by surprise that he made no attempt to deny his guilt. "I confess that I acted as M. de Valorsay's adviser for some time," he replied, "and he frequently spoke to me of his intention of marrying a rich wife in order to retrieve his shattered fortunes. Upon my word, I see nothing so very bad about that! It is not a strictly honest proceeding, perhaps, but it is done every day. What is marriage in this age? Merely a business transaction, is it not? Perhaps it would be more correct to say that it is a transaction in which one person tries to cheat the other. The fathers-in-law are deceived, or the husband, or the wife, and

sometimes all of them together. But when I discovered this scheme for ruining M. Ferailleur, I cried 'halt!' My conscience revolted at that. Dishonour an innocent man! It was base, cowardly, outrageous! And not being able to prevent this infamous act, I swore that I would avenge it."

Would Mademoiselle Marguerite accept this explanation? Chupin feared so, and accordingly turning quickly to his employer, he remarked: "To say nothing of the fact that this fine gentleman has swindled you outrageously, shrewd as you are—cheating you out of the forty thousand francs you lent him, and which he was to pay you eighty thousand for."

M. Fortunat cast a withering look at his clerk, but the mischief was done: denial was useless. He seemed fated to blunder in this affair. "Well, yes," he declared, "it's true. Valorsay *has* defrauded me, and I have sworn to have my revenge. I won't rest until I see him ruined."

Mademoiselle Marguerite was partially reassured, for she understood his zeal now. Her scorn for the man was only increased; but she was convinced that he would serve her faithfully. "I like this much better," said she. "It is better to have no concealment. You desire M. de Valorsay's ruin. I desire the rehabilitation of M. Ferailleur. So our interests are in common. But before acting in this matter, we must know M. Ferailleur's wishes."

"They cannot be considered."

"And why?"

"Because no one knows what has become of him. When the desire for revenge first took possession of me, I at once thought of him. I procured his address, and went to the Rue d'Ulm. But he had gone away. The very day after his misfortune, M. Ferailleur sold his furniture and went away with his mother."

"I am aware of that, and I have come to ask you to search for him. To discover his hiding-place will be only child's play to you."

"Do you suppose I haven't thought of this?" replied M. Fortunat. "Why, I spent all day yesterday searching for him. By questioning the people in the neighbourhood I finally succeeded in ascertaining that Madame Ferailleur left her home in a cab several hours after her son, and took a very large quantity of baggage with her. Well, do you know where she drove? To the Western railway station. I am sure of this, and I know she told a porter there that her destination was London. M. Ferailleur is now *en route* for America, and we shall never hear of him again!"

Mademoiselle Marguerite shook her head. "You are mistaken, sir," said she.

"There can be no mistake about what I have just told you."

"I don't question the result of your investigations, but appearances are deceitful. I thoroughly understand M. Ferailleur's character, and he is not the man to be crushed by an infamous calumny. He may seem to fly, he may disappear, he may conceal himself for a time, but it is only to make his vengeance more certain. What! Pascal, who is energy itself, who possesses an iron will, and invincible determination, would he renounce his honour, his future, and the woman he loves without a struggle? If he had felt that his case was hopeless, he would have destroyed himself, and as he has not done so, he is not without hope. He has not left Paris; I am sure of it."

M. Fortunat was not convinced. In his opinion this was only sentiment

and rubbish. Still there was one person present who was deeply impressed by the confidence of this young girl, who was the most beautiful creature he had ever seen, and whose devotion and energy filled his heart with admiration, and this person was Chupin. He stepped forward with his eyes sparkling with enthusiasm, and in a feeling voice he exclaimed: "I understand your idea! Yes, M. Ferailleur is in Paris. And I shall be unworthy of the name of Chupin, if I don't find him for you in less than a fortnight!"

XII.

MADEMOISELLE MARGUERITE knew Pascal Ferailleur. Suddenly struck down in the full sunlight of happiness by a terrible misfortune, he, of course, experienced moments of frenzy and terrible depression; but he was incapable of the cowardice which M. Fortunat had accused him of.

Mademoiselle Marguerite only did him justice when she said that the sole condition on which he could consent to live was that of consecrating his life, and all his strength, intelligence and will to confounding this infamous calumny. And still she did not know the extent of Pascal's misfortune. How could she suppose that he believed himself deserted by her? How could she know the doubts and fears and the anguish that had been roused in his heart by the note which Madame Léon had given him at the garden gate? What did she know of the poignant suspicions that had rent his mind, after listening to Madame Vantrasson's disparaging insinuations?

It must be admitted that he was indebted to his mother alone for his escape from suicide—that grim madness that seizes hold of so many desperate, despairing men. And it was still to his mother—the incomparable guardian of his honour—that he owed his resolution on the morning he applied to Baron Trigault. And his courage met with its first reward.

He was no longer the same man when he left the princely mansion which he had entered with his heart so full of anguish. He was still somewhat bewildered with the strange scenes which he had involuntarily witnessed, the secrets he had overheard, and the revelations which had been made to him; but a light gleamed on the horizon—a fitful and uncertain light, it is true, but nevertheless a hopeful gleam. At least, he would no longer have to struggle alone. An honest and experienced man, powerful by reason of his reputation, his connections and his fortune, had promised him his help. Thanks to this man whom misfortune had made a truer friend than years could have done, he would have access to the wretch who had deprived him both of his honour and of the woman he loved. He knew the weak spot in the marquis's armour now; he knew where and how to strike, and he felt sure that he should succeed in winning Valorsay's confidence, and in obtaining irrefutable proofs of his villainy.

Pascal was eager to inform his mother of the fortunate result of his visit, but certain arrangements which were needful for the success of his plans required his attention, and it was nearly five o'clock when he reached the Route de la Révolte. Madame Ferailleur was just returning home when he arrived, which surprised him considerably, for he had not known that she had intended going out. The cab she had used was still standing before the door, and she had not had time to take off her shawl and bonnet when he entered the house. She uttered a joyful cry on perceiving her son. She was so accustomed to read his secret thoughts on his face, that

it was unnecessary for him to say a word; before he had even opened his lips, she cried: "So you have succeeded?"

"Yes, mother, beyond my hopes."

"I was not deceived, then, in the worthy man who came to offer us his assistance?"

"No, certainly not. Do what I may, I can never repay him for his generosity and self-denial. If you knew, my dear mother, if you only knew—"

"What?"

He kissed her as if he wished to apologize for what he was about to say, and then he quickly replied: "Marguerite is the daughter of Baroness Trigault."

Madame Ferailleur started back, as if she had seen a reptile spring up in her pathway. "The daughter of the baroness!" she faltered. "Great Heavens!"

"It is the truth, mother; listen to me." And in a voice that trembled with emotion, he rapidly related all he had learned by his visit to the baron, softening the truth as much as he could without concealing it. But prevarication was useless. Madame Ferailleur's indignation and disgust were none the less evident. "That woman is a shameless creature," she said, coldly, when her son's narrative was concluded.

Pascal made no reply. He knew only too well that his mother was right, and yet it wounded him cruelly to hear her speak in this style. For the baroness was Marguerite's mother after all.

"So," continued Madame Ferailleur, with increasing indignation, "creatures do exist who are destitute even of the maternal instincts of animals. I am an honest woman myself; I don't say it in self-glorification, it's no credit to me; my mother was a saint, and I loved my husband; what some people call duty was my happiness, so I may be allowed to speak on this subject. I don't excuse infidelity, but I can understand how such a thing is possible. Yes, I can understand how a beautiful young woman, who is left alone in a city like Paris, may lose her senses, and forget the worthy man who has exiled himself for her sake, and who is braving a thousand dangers to win a fortune for her. The husband who exposes his honour and happiness to such terrible risk, is an imprudent man. But when this woman has erred, when she has given birth to a child, how she can abandon it, how she can cast it off as if it were a dog, I cannot comprehend. I could imagine infanticide more easily. No, such a woman has no heart, no bowels of compassion. There is nothing human in her! For how could she live, how could she sleep with the thought that somewhere in the world her own child, the flesh of her flesh, was exposed to all the temptations of poverty, and the horrors of shame and vice? And she, the possessor of millions, she, the inmate of a palace, thinking only of dress and pleasure! How was it that she didn't ask herself every minute, 'Where is my daughter now, and what is she doing? What is she living on? Has she shelter, clothes and food? To what depths of degradation she may have sunk? Perhaps she has so far lived by honest toil, and perhaps at this very moment this support fails her, and she is abandoning herself to a life of infamy.' Great God! how does this woman dare to step out of doors? On seeing the poor wretches who have been driven to vice by want, how can she fail to say to herself: 'That, perhaps, is my daughter!'"

Pascal turned pale, moved to the depths of his soul by his mother's extraordinary vehemence. He trembled lest she should say: "And you, my

son, would you marry the child of such a mother?" For he knew his mother's prejudices, and the great importance she attached to a spotless reputation transmitted from parent to child, from generation to generation. "The baroness knew that her husband adored her, and hearing of his return she became terrified; she lost her senses," he ventured to say in extenuation.

"Would you try to defend her?" exclaimed Madame Ferailleur. "Do you really think one can atone for a fault by a crime?"

"No, certainly not, but—"

"Perhaps you would censure the baroness more severly if you knew what her daughter has suffered—if you knew the perils and miseries she has been exposed to from the moment her mother left her on a door-step, near the central markets, till the day when her father found her. It is a miracle that she did not perish."

Where had Madame Ferailleur learned these particulars? Pascal asked himself this question without being able to answer it. "I don't understand you, mother," he faltered.

"Then you know nothing of Mademoiselle Marguerite's past life. Is it possible she never told you anything about it?"

"I only know that she has been very unhappy."

"Has she never alluded to the time when she was an apprentice?"

"She has only told me that she earned her living with her own hands at one time of her life."

"Well, I am better informed on the subject."

Pascal's amazement was changed to terror. "You, mother, you!"

"Yes; I—I have been to the asylum where she was received and educated. I have had a conversation with two Sisters of Charity who remember her, and it is scarcely an hour since I left the people to whom she was formerly bound as an apprentice."

Standing opposite his mother with one hand convulsively clutching the back of the chair he was leaning on, Pascal tried to nerve himself for some terrible blow. For was not his life at stake? Did not his whole future depend upon the revelations Madame Ferailleur was about to make? "So this was your object in going out, mother?" he faltered.

"Yes."

"And you went without warning me?"

"Was it necessary? What! you love a young girl, you swear in my presence that she shall be your wife, and you think it strange that I should try to ascertain whether she is worthy of you or not? It would be very strange if I did not do so."

"This idea occurred to you so suddenly!"

Madame Ferailleur gave an almost imperceptible shrug of the shoulders, as if she were astonished to have to answer such puerile objections. "Have you already forgotten the disparaging remarks made by our new servant, Madame Vantrasson?"

"Good Heavens!"

"I understood her base insinuations as well as you did, and after your departure I questioned her, or rather I allowed her to tell her story, and I ascertained that Mademoiselle Marguerite had once been an apprentice of Vantrasson's brother-in-law, a man named Greloux, who was formerly a bookbinder in the Rue Saint-Denis, but who has now retired from business. It was there that Vantrasson met Mademoiselle Marguerite, and this is why he was so greatly surprised to see her doing the mistress at the Hôtel de Chalusse."

It seemed to Pascal that the throbbing of his heart stopped his breath.

"By a little tact I obtained the Greloux's address from Madame Vantrasson," resumed his mother. "Then I sent for a cab and drove there at once."

"And you saw them?"

"Yes; thanks to a falsehood which doesn't trouble my conscience much, I succeeded in effecting an entrance, and had an hour's conversation with them." His mother's icy tones frightened Pascal. Her slowness tortured him, and still he dared not press her. "The Greloux family," she continued, "seem to be what are called worthy people, that is, incapable of committing any crime that is punishable by the code, and very proud of their income of seven thousand francs a year. They must have been very much attached to Mademoiselle Marguerite, for they were lavish in their protestations of affection when I mentioned her name. The husband in particular seemed to regard her with a feeling of something like gratitude."

"Ah! you see, mother, you see!"

"As for the wife, it was easy to see that she had sincerely regretted the loss of the best apprentice, the most honest servant, and the best worker she had ever seen in her life. And yet, from her own story, I should be willing to swear that she had abused the poor child, and had made a slave of her." Tears glittered in Pascal's eyes, but he breathed freely once more. "As for Vantrasson," resumed Madame Ferailleur, "it is certain that he took a violent fancy to his sister's apprentice. This man, who has since become an infamous scoundrel, was then only a rake, an unprincipled drunkard and libertine. He fancied the poor little apprentice—she was then but thirteen years old—would be only too glad to become the mistress of her employer's brother; but she scornfully repulsed him, and his vanity was so deeply wounded that he persecuted the poor girl to such an extent that she was obliged to complain, first to Madame Greloux, who—to her shame be it said—treated these insults as mere nonsense; and afterwards to Greloux himself, who was probably delighted to have an opportunity of ridding himself of his indolent brother-in-law, for he turned him out of the house."

The thought that so vile a rascal as this man Vantrasson should have dared to insult Marguerite made Pascal frantic with indignation. "The wretch!" he exclaimed; "the wretch!" But without seeming to notice her son's anger, Madame Ferailleur continued: "They pretended they had not seen their former apprentice since she had been living in grandeur, as they expressed it. But in this they lied to me. For they saw her at least once, and that was on the day she brought them twenty thousand francs, which proved the nucleus of their fortune. They did not mention this fact, however."

"Dear Marguerite!" murmured Pascal, "dear Marguerite!" And then aloud: "But where did you learn these last details, mother?" he inquired.

"At the asylum where Mademoiselle Marguerite was brought up, and there, too, I only heard words of praise. 'Never,' said the superior, 'have I had a more gifted, sweeter-tempered or more attractive charge.' They had reproached her sometimes for being too reserved, and her self-respect had often been mistaken for inordinate pride; but she had not forgotten the asylum any more than she had forgotten her former patrons. On one occasion the superior received from her the sum of twenty-five thousand francs, and a year ago she presented the institution with one hundred thousand francs, the yearly income of which is to constitute the marriage dowry of some deserving orphan."

Pascal was greatly elated. "Well, mother!" he exclaimed, "well, is it strange that I love her?" Madame Ferailleur made no reply, and a sorrowful apprehension seized hold of him. "You are silent," said he "and why? When the blessed day that will allow me to wed Marguerite arrives, you surely won't oppose our marriage?"

"No, my son, nothing that I have learned gives me the right to do so."

"The right! Ah, you are unjust, mother."

"Unjust! Haven't I faithfully reported all that was told me, although I knew it would only increase your passion?"

"That's true, but—"

Madame Ferailleur sadly shook her head, "Do you think," she interrupted, "that I can, without sorrow, see you choose a girl of no family, a girl who is outside the pale of social recognition? Don't you understand my disquietude when I think that the girl that you will marry is the daughter of such a woman as Baroness Trigault, an unfortunate girl whom her mother cannot even recognise, since her mother is a married woman—"

"Ah! mother, is that Marguerite's fault?"

"Did I say it was her fault? No—I only pray God that you may never have to repent of choosing a wife whose past life must ever remain an impenetrable mystery!"

Pascal had become very pale. "Mother!" he said in a quivering voice, "mother!"

"I mean that you will only know so much of Mademoiselle Marguerite's past life as she may choose to tell you," continued the obdurate old lady. "You heard Madame Vantrasson's ignoble allegations. It has been said that she was the mistress, not the daughter, of the Count de Chalusse. Who knows what vile accusations you may be forced to meet? And what is your refuge, if doubts should ever assail you? Mademoiselle Marguerite's word! Will this be sufficient? It is now, perhaps; but will it suffice in years to come? I would have my son's wife above suspicion; and she—why, there is not a single episode in her life that does not expose her to the most atrocious calumny."

"What does calumny matter? it will never shake my faith in her. The misfortunes which you reproach Marguerite for sanctify her in my eyes."

"Pascal!"

"What! Am I to scorn her because she has been unfortunate? Am I to regard her birth as a crime? Am I to despise her because her *mother* is a despicable woman? No—God be praised! the day when illegitimate children, the innocent victims of their mother's faults, were branded as outcasts, is past."

But Madame Ferailleur's prejudices were too deeply rooted to be shaken by these arguments. "I won't discuss this question, my son," she interrupted, "but take care. By declaring children irresponsible for their mother's faults, you will break the strongest tie that binds a woman to duty. If the son of a pure and virtuous wife, and the son of an adulterous woman meet upon equal ground, those who are held in check only by the thought of their children will finally say to themselves, what does it matter?"

It was the first time that a cloud had ever arisen between mother and son. On hearing his dearest hopes thus attacked, Pascal was tempted to rebel, and a flood of bitter words rose to his lips. However he had strength enough to control himself. "Marguerite alone can triumph over these implacable prejudices," he thought; "when my mother knows her, she will feel how unjust they are!"

And as he found it difficult to remain master of himself, he stammered some excuse, and abruptly retired to his own room, where he threw himself on his bed. He felt that it was not his place to reproach his mother or censure her for her opinions. What mother had ever been so devoted as she had been? And who knows?—it was, perhaps, from these same rigid prejudices that this simple-minded and heroic woman had derived her energy, her enthusiastic love of God, her hatred of evil, and that virility of spirit which misfortune had been powerless to daunt. Besides, had she not promised to offer no opposition to his marriage! And was not this a great concession, a sacrifice which must have cost her a severe struggle? And where can one find the mother who does not count as one of the sublime joys of maternity the task of seeking a wife for her son, of choosing from among all others, the young girl who will be the companion of his life, the angel of his dark and of his prosperous days? His mind was occupied with these thoughts when his door suddenly opened, and he sprang up, exclaiming: "Who is it?"

It was Madame Vantrasson, who came to announce that dinner was ready—a dinner which she had herself prepared, for on going out Madame Ferailleur had left her in charge of the household. On seeing this woman, Pascal was overcome with rage and indignation, and felt a wild desire to annihilate her. He knew that she was only a vile slanderer, but she might meet other beings as vile as herself who would be only too glad to believe her falsehoods. And to think that he was powerless to punish her! He now realised the suffering his mother had spoken of—the most atrocious suffering which the lover can endure—powerlessness to protect the object of his affections, when she is assailed. Engrossed in these gloomy thoughts, Pascal preserved a sullen silence during the repast. He ate because his mother filled his plate; but if he had been questioned, he could scarcely have told what he was eating. And yet, the modest dinner was excellent. Madame Vantrasson was really a good cook, and in this first effort in her new situation she had surpassed herself. Her vanity as a *cordon-bleu* was piqued because she did not receive the compliments she expected, and which she felt she deserved. Four or five times she asked impatiently, "Isn't that good?" and as the only reply was a scarcely enthusiastic "Very good," she vowed she would never again waste so much care and talent upon such unappreciative people.

Madame Ferailleur was as silent as her son, and seemed equally anxious to finish with the repast. She evidently wanted to get rid of Madame Vantrasson, and in fact as soon as the simple dessert had been placed on the table, she turned to her, and said: "You may go home now. I will attend to the rest."

Irritated by the taciturnity of these strange folks the landlady of the Model Lodging House withdrew, and they soon heard the street door close behind her with a loud bang as she left the house. Pascal drew a long breath as if relieved of a heavy weight. While Madame Vantrasson had been in the room he had scarcely dared to raise his eyes, so great was his dread of encountering the gaze of this woman, whose malignity was but poorly veiled by her smooth-tongued hypocrisy. He really feared he should not be able to resist his desire to strangle her. However, Madame Ferailleur must have understood her son's agitation, for as soon as they were alone, she said: "So you have not forgiven me for my plain speaking?"

"How can I be angry with you, mother, when I know that you are thinking only of my happiness? But how sorry I shall be if your prejudices—"

Madame Ferailleur checked him with a gesture. "Let us say no more on the subject," she remarked. "Mademoiselle Marguerite will be the innocent cause of one of the greatest disappointments of my life; but I have no reason to hate her—and I have always been able to shew justice even to the persons I loved the least. I have done so in this instance, and I am going perhaps to give you a convincing proof of it."

"A proof?"

"Yes."

She reflected for a moment and then she asked: "Did you not tell me, my son, that Mademoiselle Marguerite's education has not suffered on account of her neglected childhood?"

"And it's quite true, mother."

"She worked diligently, you said, so as to improve herself?"

"Marguerite knows all that an unusually talented girl can learn in four years, when she finds herself very unhappy, and study proves her only refuge and consolation."

"If she wrote you a note would it be written grammatically, and be free from any mistakes in spelling?"

"Oh, certainly!" exclaimed Pascal, and a sudden inspiration made him pause abruptly. He darted to his own room, and a minute later he returned with a package of letters, which he laid on the table, saying: "Here, mother, read and see for yourself."

Madame Ferailleur drew her spectacles from their case, and, after adjusting them, she began to read.

With his elbows on the table, and his head resting upon his hands, Pascal eagerly watched his mother, anxious to read her impressions on her face. She was evidently astonished. She had not expected these letters would express such nobility of sentiment, an energy no whit inferior to her own, and even an echo of her own prejudices. For this strange young girl shared Madame Ferailleur's rather bigoted opinions. Again and again she asked herself if her birth and past had not created an impassable abyss between Pascal and herself. And she had not felt satisfied on this point until the day when the grey-haired magistrate, after hearing her story, said: "If I had a son, I should be proud to have him beloved by you!"

It soon became apparent that Madame Ferailleur was deeply moved, and once she even raised her glasses to wipe away a furtive tear which made Pascal's heart leap with very joy. "These letters are admirable," she said at last; "and no young girl, reared by a virtuous mother, could have given better expression to nobler sentiments; but—" She paused, not wishing to wound her son's feelings, and as he insisted, she added: "But, these letters have the irreparable fault of being addressed to you, Pascal!"

This however, was the expiring cry of her intractable obstinacy. "Now," she resumed, "wait before you censure your mother." So saying she rose, opened a drawer, and taking from it a torn and crumpled scrap of paper, she handed it to her son, exclaiming: "Read this attentively."

This proved to be the note in pencil which Madame Léon had given to Pascal, and which he had divined rather than read by the light of the street-lamp; he had handed it to his mother on his return, and she had kept it. He had scarcely been in his right mind the evening he received it, but now he was enjoying the free exercise of all his faculties. He no sooner glanced at the note than he sprang up, and in an excited voice, exclaimed, "Marguerite never wrote this!"

The strange discovery seemed to stupefy him. "I was mad, raving mad!" he muttered. "The fraud is palpable, unmistakeable. How could I have failed to discover it?" And as if he felt the need of convincing himself that he was not deceived, he continued, speaking to himself rather than to his mother: "The handwriting is not unlike Marguerite's, it's true; but it's only a clever counterfeit. And who doesn't know that all writings in pencil resemble each other more or less? Besides, it's certain that Marguerite, who is simplicity itself, would not have made use of such pretentious melodramatic phrases. How could I have been so stupid as to believe that she ever thought or wrote this: 'One cannot break a promise made to the dying; I shall keep mine even though my heart break.' And again: 'Forget, therefore, the girl who has loved you so much; she is now the betrothed of another, and honour requires she should forget even your name!'" He read these passages with an extravagant emphasis, which heightened their absurdity. "And what shall I say of these mistakes in spelling?" he resumed. "You noticed them, of course, mother?—command is written with a single 'm,' and supplicate with one 'p.' These are certainly not mistakes that we can attribute to haste! Ignorance is proved since the blunder is always the same. The forger is evidently in the habit of omitting one of the double letters."

Madame Ferailleur listened with an impassive face. "And these mistakes are all the more inexcusable since this letter is only a copy," she observed, quietly.

"What?"

"Yes; a verbatim copy. Yesterday evening, while I was examining it for the twentieth time, it occurred to me that I had read some portions of it before. Where, and under what circumstances? It was a puzzle which kept me awake most of the night. But this morning I suddenly remembered a book which I had seen in the hands of the workmen at the factory, and which I had often laughed over. So, while I was out this morning I entered a book-shop, and purchased the volume. That's it, there on the corner of the mantel-shelf. Take it and see."

Pascal obeyed, and noticed with surprise that the work was entitled, "The Indispensable and Complete Letter-writer, for Both Sexes, in Every Condition of Life."

"Now turn to the page I have marked," said Madame Ferailleur.

He did so, and read: "(*Model* 198). Letter from a young lady who has promised her dying father to renounce the man she loves, and to bestow her hand upon another." Doubt was no longer possible. Line for line and word for word, the mistakes in spelling excepted, the note was an exact copy of the stilted prose of the "Indispensable Letter-writer."

It seemed to Pascal as if the scales had suddenly fallen from his eyes, and that he could now understand the whole intrigue which had been planned to separate him from Marguerite. His enemies had dishonoured him in the hope that she would reject and scorn him, and, disappointed in their expectations, they had planned this pretended rupture of the engagement to prevent him from making any attempt at self-justification. So, in spite of some short-lived doubts, his love had been more clear-sighted than reason, and stronger than appearances. He had been quite right, then, in saying to his mother: I can never believe that Marguerite deserts me at a moment when I am so wretched—that she condemns me unheard, and has no greater confidence in me than in my accusers. Appearances may indicate the contrary, but I am right." Certain circumstances, which had previously

seemed contradictory, now strengthened this belief. "How is it," he said to himself, "that Marguerite writes to me that her father, on his death-bed, made her promise to renounce me, while Valorsay declares the Count de Chalusse died so suddenly, that he had not even time to acknowledge his daughter or to bequeath her his immense fortune? One of these stories must be false; and which of them? The one in this note most probably. As for the letter itself, it must have been the work of Madame Léon."

If he had not already possessed irrefutable proofs of this, the "Indispensable Letter-writer" would have shewn it. The housekeeper's perturbation when she met him at the garden gate was now explained. She was shuddering at the thought that she might be followed and watched, and that Marguerite might appear at any moment, and discover everything.

"I think it would be a good plan to let this poor young girl know that her companion is Valorsay's spy," remarked Madame Ferailleur.

Pascal was about to approve this suggestion, when a sudden thought deterred him. "They must be watching Marguerite very closely," he replied, "and if I attempt to see her, if I even venture to write to her, our enemies would undoubtedly discover it. And then, farewell to the success of my plans."

"Then you prefer to leave her exposed to these dangers?"

"Yes, even admitting there is danger, which is by no means certain. Owing to her past life, Marguerite's experience is far in advance of her years, and if some one told me that she had fathomed Madame Léon's character, I should not be at all surprised."

It was necessary to ascertain what had become of Marguerite; and Pascal was puzzling his brain to discover how this might be done, when suddenly he exclaimed: "Madame Vantrasson! We have her; let us make use of her. It will be easy to find some excuse for sending her to the Hôtel de Chalusse: she will gossip with the servants there, and in that way we can discover the changes that have taken place."

This was a heroic resolution on Pascal's part, and one which he would have recoiled from the evening before. But it is easy to be brave when one is hopeful; and he saw his chances of success increase so rapidly that he no longer feared the obstacles that had once seemed almost insurmountable. Even his mother's opposition had ceased to alarm him. For why should he fear after the surprising proof she had given him of her love of justice, proving that the pretended letter from Mademoiselle Marguerite was really a forgery?

He slept but little that night and did not stir from the house on the following day. He was busily engaged in perfecting his plan of attack against the marquis. His advantages were considerable, thanks to Baron Trigault, who had placed a hundred thousand francs at his disposal; but the essential point was to use this amount in such a way as to win Valorsay's confidence, and induce him to betray himself. Pascal's hours of meditation were not spent in vain, and when it became time for him to repair to his enemy's house, he said to his mother: "I've found a plan; and if the baron will let me follow it out, Valorsay is mine!"

XIII.

It was pure childishness on Pascal's part to doubt Baron Trigault's willingness to agree even with closed eyes to any measures he might propose. He ought to have recollected that their interests were identical, that they hated the same men with equal hatred, and that they were equally resolved

upon vengeance. And certainly the events which had occurred since their last interview had not been of a nature to modify the baron's intentions. However, misfortune had rendered Pascal timid and suspicious, and it was not until he reached the baron's house that his fears vanished. The manner in which the servants received him proved that the baron greatly esteemed him: for the man must be stupid indeed who does not know that the greeting of the servants is ever in harmony with the feelings of the master of the house. "Will you be kind enough to follow me?" said the servant to whom he handed his card. "The baron is very busy, but that doesn't matter. He gave orders that monsieur should be shown up as soon as he arrived."

Pascal followed without a word. The elegance of this princely abode never varied. The same careless, prodigal, regal luxury was apparent everywhere. The servants—whose name was legion—were always passing noiselessly to and fro. A pair of horses, worth at least a thousand louis, and harnessed to the baroness's brougham, were stamping and neighing in the courtyard; and the hall was, as usual, fragrant with the perfume of rare flowers, renewed every morning.

On his first visit Pascal had only seen the apartments on the ground floor. This time his guide remarked that he would take him upstairs to the baron's private room. He was slowly ascending the broad marble staircase and admiring the bronze balustrade, the rich carpet, the magnificent frescoes, and the costly statuary, when a rustle of silk resounded near him. He had only time to step aside, and a lady passed him rapidly, without turning her head, or even deigning to look at him. She did not appear more than forty, and she was still very beautiful, with her golden hair dressed high on the back of her head. Her costume, brilliant enough in hue to frighten a cab horse, was extremely eccentric in cut; but it certainly set off her peculiar style of beauty to admirable advantage.

"That's the baroness," whispered the servant, after she had passed.

Pascal did not need to be told this. He had seen her but once, and then only for a second; but it had been under such circumstances that he should never forget her so long as he lived. And now he understood the strange and terrible impression which had been produced upon him when he saw her first. Mademoiselle Marguerite was the living prototype of this lady, save as regards the colour of her hair. And there would have been no difference in this respect had the baroness allowed her locks to retain their natural tint. Her hair had been black, like Marguerite's, and black it had remained until she was thirty-five, when she bleached it to the fashionable colour of the time. And every fourth day even now her hair-dresser came to apply a certain compound to her head, after which she remained in the bright sunlight for several hours, so as to impart a livelier shade of gold to her dyed locks.

Pascal had scarcely regained his composure, when the servant opened the door of an immense apartment as large as a handsome *suite* of rooms, and magnificently furnished. Here sat the baron, surrounded by several clerks, who were busily engaged in putting a pile of papers and documents in order.

But as soon as Pascal entered, the baron rose, and cordially holding out his hand, exclaimed, "Ah! here you are at last, Monsieur Mauméjan!"

So he had not forgotten the name which Pascal had assumed. This was a favourable omen. "I called, monsieur—" began the young man.

"Yes—I know—I know!" interrupted the baron. "Come, we must have a talk."

And, taking Pascal's arm, he led him into his private sanctum, separated from the large apartment by folding-doors, which had been removed, and replaced by hangings. Once there he indicated by a gesture that they could be heard in the adjoining room, and that it was necessary to speak in a low tone. "You have no doubt come," said he, "for the money I promised that dear Marquis de Valorsay—I have it all ready for you; here it is." So saying, he opened an escritoire, and took out a large roll of bank-notes, which he handed to Pascal. "Here, count it," he added, "and see if the amount is correct."

But Pascal, whose face had suddenly become as red as fire, did not utter a word in reply. On receiving this money a new but quite natural thought had entered his mind for the first time. "What is the matter?" inquired the baron, surprised by this sudden embarrassment. "What has happened to you?"

"Nothing, monsieur, nothing! Only I was asking myself—if I ought—if I can accept this money."

"Bah! and why not?"

"Because if you lend it to M. de Valorsay, it is perhaps lost."

"*Perhaps!* You are polite—"

"Yes, monsieur, you are right. I ought to have said that it is sure to be lost; and hence my embarrassment. Is it not solely on my account that you sacrifice a sum which would be a fortune to many men? Yes. Very well, then. I am asking myself if it is right for me to accept such a sacrifice, when it is by no means certain that I shall ever be able to requite it. Shall I ever have a hundred thousand francs to repay you?"

"But isn't this money absolutely necessary to enable you to win Valorsay's confidence?"

"Yes, and if it belonged to me I should not hesitate."

Though the baron had formed a high estimate of Pascal's character, he was astonished and deeply touched by these scruples, and this excessive delicacy of feeling. Like most opulent men, he knew few poor people who wore their poverty with grace and dignity, and who did not snatch at a twenty-franc piece wherever they chanced to find it. "Ah, well, my dear Ferailleur," he said, kindly, "don't trouble yourself on this score. It's not at your request nor solely on your account that I make this sacrifice."

"Oh!"

"No; I give you my word of honour it isn't. Leaving you quite out of the question, I should still have lent Valorsay this money; and if you do not wish to take it to him, I shall send it by some one else."

After that, Pascal could not demur any further. He took the baron's proffered hand and pressed it warmly, uttering only this one word, made more eloquent than any protestations by the fervour with which it was spoken: "Thanks!"

The baron shrugged his shoulders good-naturedly, like a man who fails to see that he has done anything at all meritorious, or even worthy of the slightest acknowledgment. "And you must understand, my dear sir," he resumed, "that you can employ this sum as you choose, in advancing your interests, which are identical with mine. You can give the money to Valorsay at such a time and under such conditions as will best serve your plans. Give it to him in an hour or in a month, all at once or in fifty different instalments, as you please. Only use it like the rope one ties round a dog's neck before drowning him."

The keenest penetration was concealed beneath the baron's careless good-nature. Pascal knew this, and feeling that his protector understood him. "You overpower me with kindness," he said.

"Nonsense!"

"You offer me just what I came to ask for."

"So much the better."

"But you will allow me to explain my intentions?"

"It is quite unnecessary, my dear sir."

"Excuse me; if I follow my present plan, I shall be obliged to ascribe certain sentiments, words, and even acts, to you, which you might perhaps disavow, and—"

With a careless toss of the head, accompanied by a disdainful snap of the fingers, the baron interrupted him. "Set to work, and don't give yourself the slightest uneasiness about that. You may do whatever you like, if you only succeed in unmasking this dear marquis, and Coralth, his worthy acolyte. Show me up in whatever light you choose. Who will you be in Valorsay's eyes? Why, Mauméjan, one of my business agents, and I can always throw the blame on you." And as if to prove that he had divined even the details of the scheme devised by his young friend, he added: "Besides, every one knows that a millionaire's business agent is anything but a pleasant person to deal with. A millionaire, who is not a fool, must always smile, and no matter how absurd the demands upon him may be, he must always answer: 'Yes, certainly, certainly—I should be only to happy!' But then he adds: 'You must arrange the matter with my agent. Confer with him.' And it is the unlucky agent who must object, declare that his employer has no money at his disposal just now, and finally say, 'No.'"

Pascal was still disposed to insist, but the baron was obdurate. "Oh! enough, enough!" he exclaimed. "Don't waste precious time in idle discussion. The days are only twenty-four hours long: and as you see, I'm very busy, so busy that I've not touched a card since the day before yesterday. I am preparing a delightful surprise for Madame Trigault, my daughter, and my son-in-law. It has been rather a delicate operation, but I flatter myself that I have succeeded finely." And he laughed a laugh that was not pleasant to hear. "You see I've had enough of paying several hundred thousand francs a year for the privilege of being sneered at by my wife, scorned by my daughter, swindled by my son-in-law, and vilified and anathematized by all three of them. I am still willing to go on paying, but only on conditions that they give me in return for my money, if not the reality, at least a show of love, affection, and respect. I'm determined to have the semblance of these things; I'm quite resolved on that. Yes, I will have myself treated with deference. I'll be petted and coddled and made much of, or else I'll suspend payment. It was one of my old friends, a *parvenu* like myself—a man whose domestic happiness I have envied for many years—who gave me this receipt: 'At home,' said he, 'with my wife, my daughters, and my sons-in-law, I'm like a peer of England at an hotel. I order first class happiness at so much a month. If I get it I pay for it; if I don't get it, I cut off the supplies. When I get extras I pay for them cheerfully, without haggling. Follow my example, my old friend, and you'll have a comfortable life.' And I shall follow his advice, M. Ferailleur, for I am convinced that his theory is sound and practicable. I have led this life long enough. I'll spend my last days in peace, or, as God hears me, I'll let my family die of starvation!"

His face was purple, and the veins on his forehead stood out like whip-cords, but not so much from anger as from the constraint he imposed upon himself by speaking in a whisper. He drew a long breath, and then in a calmer tone, resumed: "But you must make haste and succeed, M. Ferailleur, if you don't want the young girl you love to be deprived of her rightful heritage. You do not know into what unworthy hands the Chalusse property is about to fall." He was on the point of telling Pascal the story of Madame d'Argelès and M. Wilkie, when he was interrupted by the sound of a lively controversy in the hall.

"Who's taking such liberty in my house?" the baron began. But the next instant he heard some one fling open the door of the large room adjoining, and then a coarse, guttural voice called out: "What! he isn't here! This is too much!"

The baron made an angry gesture, "That's Kami-Bey," said he "the Turk whom I am playing that great game of cards with. The devil take him! He will be sure to force his way in here—so we may as well join him, M. Ferailleur."

On re-entering the adjoining apartment Pascal beheld a very corpulent man, with a very red face, a straggling beard, a flat nose, small, bead-like eyes, and sensual lips. He was clad in a black frock-coat, buttoned tight to the throat, and he wore a fez. This costume gave him the appearance of a chunky bottle, sealed with red wax. Such, indeed, was Kami-Bey, a specimen of those semi-barbarians, loaded with gold, who are not attracted to Paris, by its splendours and glories, but rather by its corruption—people who come there persuaded that money will purchase anything and everything, and who often return home with the same conviction. Kami was no doubt more impudent, more cynical and more arrogant than others of his class. As he was more wealthy, he had more followers; he had been more toadied and flattered, and victimized to a greater extent by the host of female intriguers, who look upon every foreigner as their rightful prey.

He spoke French passably well, but with an abominable accent. "Here you are at last!" he exclaimed, as the baron entered the room. "I was becoming very anxious."

"About what, prince?"

Why Kami-Bey was called prince no one knew, not even the man himself. Perhaps it was because the lackey who opened his carriage door on his arrival at the Grand Hotel had addressed him by that title.

"About what!" he repeated. "You have won more than three hundred thousand francs from me, and I was wondering if you intended to give me the slip."

The baron frowned, and this time he omitted the title of prince altogether. "It seems to me, sir, that according to our agreement, we were to play until one of us had won five hundred thousand francs," he said haughtily.

"That's true—but we ought to play every day."

"Possibly: but I'm very busy just now. I wrote to you explaining this, did I not? If you are at all uneasy, tear up the book in which the results of our games are noted, and that shall be the end of it. You will gain considerably by the operation."

Kami-Bey felt that the baron would not tolerate his arrogance, and so with more moderation he exclaimed: "It isn't strange that I've become suspicious. I'm so victimized on every side. Because I'm a foreigner and immensely rich, everybody fancies he has a right to plunder me. Men,

women, hotel-keepers and merchants, all unite in defrauding me. If I buy pictures, they sell me vile daubs at fabulous prices. They ask ridiculous amounts for horses, and then give me worthless, worn-out animals. Everybody borrows money from me—and I'm never repaid. I shall be ruined if this sort of thing goes on much longer."

He had taken a seat, and the baron saw that he was not likely to get rid of his guest very soon; so approaching Pascal he whispered: "You had better go off, or you may miss Valorsay. And be careful, mind; for he is exceedingly shrewd. Courage and good luck!"

Courage! It was not necessary to recommend that to Pascal. He who had triumphed over his despair in the terrible hours, when he had reason to suppose that Marguerite believed him guilty and had abandoned him, could scarcely lack courage. While he was condemned to inaction, his mind had no doubt been assailed by countless doubts and fears; but now that he knew whom he was to attack—now that the decisive moment had come, he was endowed with indomitable energy; he had turned to bronze, and he felt sure that nothing could disconcert or even trouble him in future. The weapons he had to use were not at all to his taste, but he had not been allowed a choice in the matter; and since his enemies had decided on a warfare of duplicity, he was resolved to surpass them in cunning, and vanquish them by deception.

So, while hastening to the Marquis de Valorsay's residence, he took stock of his chances, and recapitulated his resources, striving to foresee and remember everything. Thus if he failed—for he admitted the possibility of defeat, without believing in it—he would have no cause to reproach himself. Only fools find consolation in saying: "Who could have foreseen that?" Great minds do foresee. And Pascal felt almost certain that he was fully prepared for any emergency.

That morning, before leaving home, he had dressed with extreme care, realising that the shabby clothes he had worn on his first visit to the Trigault mansion would not be appropriate on such an occasion as this. The baron's agent could scarcely have a poverty-stricken appearance, for contact with millionaires is supposed to procure wealth as surely as proximity to fire ensures warmth. So he arrayed himself in a suit of black, which was neither too elegant nor too much worn, and donned a broad white necktie. He could see only one immediate, decisive chance against him. M. de Valorsay might possibly recognize him. He thought not, but he was not sure; and anxious on this account, he at first decided to disguise himself. However, on reflection, he concluded not to do so. An imperfect disguise would attract attention and awaken suspicion; and could he really disguise his physiognomy? He was certain he could not. Very few men are capable of doing so successfully, even after long experience. Only two or three detectives and half a dozen actors possess the art of really changing their lineaments. Thus after weighing the pros and cons, Pascal determined to present himself as he was at the marquis's house.

On approaching M. de Valorsay's residence in the Avenue des Champs Elysées, he slackened his pace. The mansion, which stood between a courtyard and a garden, was very large and handsome. The stables and carriage-house—really elegant structures—stood on either side of the courtyard, near the half-open gate of which five or six servants were amusing themselves by teasing a large dog. Pascal was just saying to himself that the coast was clear, and that he should incur no danger by going in, when he saw the servants step aside, the gate swing back, and M. de Coralth

emerge, accompanied by a young, fair-haired man, whose moustaches were waxed and turned up in the most audacious fashion. They were arm in arm, and turned in the direction of the Arc de Triomphe. Pascal's heart thrilled with joy. "Fate favours me!" he said to himself. "If it hadn't been for Kami-Bey, who detained me a full quarter of an hour at Baron Trigault's, I should have found myself face to face with that miserable viscount, and then all would have been lost. But now I'm safe!"

It was with this encouraging thought that he approached the house.

"The marquis is very busy this morning," said the servant to whom Pascal addressed himself at the gate. "I doubt if he can see you." But when Pascal handed him one of his visiting cards, bearing the name of Maumėjan, with this addition in pencil: "Who calls as the representative of Baron Trigault," the valet's face changed as if by enchantment. "Oh!" said he, "that's quite a different matter. If you come from Baron Trigault, you will be received with all the respect due to the Messiah. Come in. I will announce you myself."

Everything in M. de Valorsay's house, as at the baron's residence, indicated great wealth, and yet a close observer would have detected a difference. The luxury of the Rue de la Ville-l'Evėque was of a real and substantial character, which one did not find in the Avenue des Champs Elysées. Everything in the marquis's abode bore marks of the haste which mars the merest trifle produced at the present age. "Take a seat here, and I will see where the marquis is," said the servant, as he ushered Pascal into a large drawing-room. The apartment was elegantly furnished, but had somewhat lost its freshness; the carpet, which had once been a marvel of beauty, was stained in several places, and as the servants had not always been careful to keep the shutters closed, the sunlight had perceptibly faded the curtains. The attention of visitors was at once attracted by the number of gold and silver cups, vases, and statuettes scattered about on sidetables and cheffoniers. Each of these objects bore an inscription, setting forth that it had been won at such a race, in such a year, by such a horse, belonging to the Marquis de Valorsay. These were indeed the marquis's chief claims to glory, and had cost him at least half of the immense fortune he had inherited. However, Pascal did not take much interest in these trophies, so the time of waiting seemed long. "Valorsay is playing the diplomat," he thought. "He doesn't wish to appear to be anxious. Unfortunately, his servant has betrayed him."

At last the valet returned. "The marquis will see you now, monsieur," said he.

This summons affected Pascal's heart like the first roll of a drum beating the charge. But his coolness did not desert him. "Now is the decisive moment," he thought. "Heaven grant that he may not recognize me!" And with a firm step he followed the valet.

M. de Valorsay was seated in the apartment he usually occupied when he remained at home—a little smoking-room connected with his bedroom. He was to all intents busily engaged in examining some sporting journals. A bottle of Madeira and a partially filled glass stood near him. As the servant announced "Monsieur Maumėjan!" he looked up and his eyes met Pascal's. But his glance did not waver; not a muscle of his face moved; his countenance retained its usually cold and disdainful expression. Evidently he had not the slightest suspicion that the man he had tried to ruin—his mortal enemy—was standing there before him.

"M. Maumėjan," said he, "Baron Trigault's agent?"

"Yes, monsieur—"

"Pray be seated. I am just finishing here; I shall be at leisure in a moment."

Pascal took a chair. He had feared that he might not be able to retain his self-control when he found himself in the presence of the scoundrel who, after destroying his happiness, ruining his future, and depriving him of his honour—dearer than life itself—was at that moment endeavouring, by the most infamous manœuvres, to rob him of the woman he loved. "If my blood mounted to my brain," he had thought, "I should spring upon him and strangle him!" But no. His arteries did not throb more quickly; it was with perfect calmness—the calmness of a strong nature—that he stealthily watched M. de Valorsay. If he had seen him a week before he would have been startled by the change which the past few days had wrought in this brilliant nobleman's appearance. He was little more than a shadow of his former self. And seen at this hour, before placing himself in his valet's hands, before his premature decrepitude had been concealed by the artifices of the toilet, he was really frightful. His face was haggard, and his red and swollen eyelids betrayed a long-continued want of sleep.

The fact is he had suffered terribly during the past week. A man may be a scapegrace and a spendthrift and may boast of it; he may have no principle and no conscience; he may be immoral, he may defy God and the devil, but it is nevertheless true that he suffers fearful anguish of mind when he is guilty, for the first time, of a positive crime, forbidden by the laws and punishable with the galleys. And who can say how many crimes the Marquis de Valorsay had committed since the day he provided his accomplice, the Viscount de Coralth, with those fatal cards? And apart from this there was something extremely appalling in the position of this ruined millionaire, who was contending desperately against his creditors for the vain appearance of splendour, with the despairing energy of a shipwrecked mariner struggling for the possession of a floating spar. Had he not confessed to M. Fortunat that he had suffered the tortures of the damned in his struggle to maintain a show of wealth, while he was often without a penny in his pocket, and was ever subject to the pitiless surveillance of thirty servants? His agony, when he thought of his precarious condition, could only be compared to that of a miner, who, while ascending from the bowels of the earth, finds that the rope, upon which his life depends, is slowly parting strand by strand, and who asks himself, in terror, if the few threads that still remain unsevered will be strong enough to raise him to the mouth of the pit.

However, the moment which M. de Valorsay had asked for had lengthened into a quarter of an hour, and he had not yet finished his work. "What the devil is he doing?" wondered Pascal, who was following his enemy's slightest moment with eager curiosity.

Countless sporting newspapers were strewn over the table, the chairs, and the floor around the marquis, who took them up one after another, glanced rapidly through their columns, and threw them on the floor again, or placed them on a pile before him, first marking certain passages with a red pencil. At last, probably fearing that Pascal was growing impatient, he looked up and said:

"I am really very sorry to keep you waiting so long, but some one is waiting for this work to be completed."

"Oh! pray continue, Monsieur le Marquis," interrupted Pascal. "Strange to say, I have a little leisure at my command just now."

The marquis seemed to feel that it was necessary to make some remark in acknowledgment of this courtesy on his visitor's part, and so, as he continued his work, he condescended to explain its purpose. "I am playing the part of a commentator," he remarked. "I sold seven of my horses a few days ago, and the purchaser, before paying the stipulated price, naturally required an exact and authentic statement of each animal's performances. However, even this does not seem to have satisfied the gentleman, for he has now taken it into his head to ask for such copies of the sporting journals as record the victories or defeats of the animals he has purchased. A gentleman is not so exacting generally. It is true, however, that I have a foreigner to deal with—one of those half-civilized nabobs who come here every year to astonish the Parisians with their wealth and display, and who, by their idiotic prodigality, have so increased the price of everything that life has become well-nigh an impossibility to such of us as don't care to squander an entire fortune in a couple of years. These folks are the curse of Paris, for, with but few exceptions, they only use their millions to enrich notorious women, scoundrels, hotel-keepers, and jockeys."

Pascal at once thought of the foreigner, Kami-Bey, whom he had met at Baron Trigault's half-an-hour before, and who had complained so bitterly of having had worthless scrubs palmed off upon him when he fancied he had purchased valuable animals. "Kami-Bey must be this exacting purchaser," thought Pascal, "and it's probable that the marquis, desperately straitened as he is, has committed one of those frauds which lead their perpetrator to prison?" The surmise was by no means far-fetched, for in sporting matters, at least, there was cause to suspect Valorsay of great elasticity of conscience. Had he not already been accused of defrauding Domingo's champions by a conspiracy?

At last the marquis heaved a sigh of relief. "I've finished," he muttered, as he tied up the bundle of papers he had laid aside, and after ringing the bell, he said to the servant who answered the summons: "Here, take this package to Prince Kami at the Grand Hotel."

Pascal's presentiments had not deceived him, and he said to himself: "This is a good thing to know. Before this evening I shall look into this affair a little."

A storm was decidedly gathering over the Marquis de Valorsay's head. Did he know it? Certainly he must have expected it. Still he had sworn to stand fast until the end. Besides, he would not concede that all was lost; and, like most great gamblers, he told himself that since he had so much at stake, he might reasonably hope to succeed. He rose, stretched himself, as a man is apt to do after the conclusion of a tiresome task, and then, leaning against the mantel-shelf, he exclaimed: "Now, Monsieur Maumejan, let us speak of the business that brings you here." His negligent attitude and his careless tone were admirably assumed, but a shrewd observer would not have been deceived by them, or by the indifferent manner in which he added: "You bring me some money from Baron Trigault?"

Pascal shook his head, as he replied: "I regret to say that I don't, Monsieur le Marquis."

This response had the same effect as a heavy rock falling upon M. de Valorsay's bald pate. He turned whiter than his linen, and even tottered, as if his lame leg, which was so much affected by sudden changes in the weather, had utterly refused all service. "What! you haven't—this is undoubtedly a joke."

"It is only too serious!"

"But I had the baron's word."

"Oh! his word!"

"I had his solemn promise."

"It is sometimes impossible to keep one's promises, sir."

The consequences of this disappointment must have been terrible, for the marquis could not maintain his self-control. Still he strove valiantly to conceal his emotion. He thought to himself that if he allowed this man to see what a terrible blow this really was, he would virtually confess his absolute ruin, and have to renounce the struggle, and own himself vanquished and lost. So, summoning all his energy, he mastered his emotion in some degree, and, instead of appearing desperate, succeeded in looking only irritated and annoyed. "In short," he resumed, angrily, "you have brought no money! I counted on a hundred thousand francs this morning. Nothing! This is kind on the baron's part! But probably he doesn't understand the embarrassing position in which he places me."

"Excuse me, Monsieur le Marquis, he understands it so well that, instead of informing you by a simple note, he sent me to acquaint you with his sincere regret. When I left him an hour ago, he was really disconsolate. He was particularly anxious I should tell you that it was not his fault. He counted upon the payment of two very large amounts, and both of these have failed him."

The marquis had now recovered a little from the shock, though he was still very pale. He looked at Pascal with evident distrust, for he knew with what sweet excuses well-bred people envelope their refusals. "So the baron is disconsolate," he remarked, in a tone of perceptible irony.

"He is indeed!"

"Poor baron! Ah! I pity him—pity him deeply."

As cold and as unmoved as a statue, Pascal seemed quite unconscious of the effect of the message he had brought—quite unconscious of Valorsay's sufferings and self-constraint. "You think I am jesting, monsieur," he said, quietly, "but I assure you that the baron is very short of money just now."

"Nonsense! a man worth seven or eight millions of francs."

"I should say ten millions, at least."

"Then the excuse is all the more absurd."

Pascal shrugged his shoulders disdainfully. "It astonishes me, Monsieur le Marquis, to hear *you* speak in this way. It is not the magnitude of a man's income that constitutes affluence, but rather the way in which that income is spent. In this foolish age, almost all rich people are in arrears. What income does the baron derive from his ten millions of francs? Not more than five hundred thousand. A very handsome fortune, no doubt, and I should be more than content with it. But the baron gambles, and the baroness is the most elegant—in other words, the most extravagant—woman in Paris. They both of them love luxury, and their establishment is kept up in princely style. What are five hundred thousand francs under such circumstances as those? Their situation must be something like that of several millionaires of my acquaintance, who are obliged to take their silver to the pawnbroker's while waiting for their rents to fall due."

This excuse might not be true, but it was certainly a very plausible one. Had not a recent lawsuit revealed the fact that certain rich folks, who had an income of more than a hundred thousand francs a year, had kept a thieving coachman for six months, simply because, in all that time, they

were not able to raise the eight hundred francs they owed him, and which must be paid before he was dismissed? M. de Valorsay knew this, but a terrible disquietude seized him. Had people begun to suspect *his* embarrassment? Had any rumour of it reached Baron Trigault's ears? This was what he wished to ascertain. "Let us understand each other, Monsieur Maumejan," said he; "the baron was unable to procure this money he had promised me to-day—but when will he let me have it?"

Pascal opened his eyes in pretended astonishment, and it was with an air of the utmost simplicity that he replied, "I concluded the baron would take no further action in the matter. I judged so from his parting words. 'It consoles me a little,' he said, 'to think that the Marquis de Valorsay is very rich and very well known, and that he has a dozen friends who will be delighted to do him this trifling service.'"

Until now, M. de Valorsay had cherished a hope that the loan was only delayed, and the certainty that the decision was final, crushed him. "My ruin's known," he thought, and feeling that his strength was deserting him, he poured out a brimming glass of Madeira, which he emptied at a single draught. The wine lent him fictitious energy. Fury mounted to his brain; he lost all control over himself, and springing up, with his face purple with rage, he exclaimed: "It's a shame! an infamous shame! and Trigault deserves to be severely punished. He has no business to keep a man in hot water for three days about such a trifle. If he had said 'No' in the first place, I should have made other arrangements, and I shouldn't now find myself in a dilemma from which I see no possible way of escape. No gentleman would have been guilty of such a contemptible act—no one but a shopkeeper or a thief would have stooped to such meanness! This is the result of admitting these ridiculous *parvenus* into society, just because they happen to have money."

It certainly hurt Pascal to hear these insults heaped upon the baron, and it hurt him all the more since they were entirely due to the course he had personally adopted.

However, a gesture, even a frown, might endanger the success of his undertaking, so he preserved an impassive countenance. "I must say that I don't understand your indignation, Monsieur le Marquis," he said coldly. "I can see why you might feel annoyed, but why you should fly into a passion—"

"Ah! you don't know—" began M. de Valorsay, but he stopped short. It was time. The truth had almost escaped his lips.

"Know what?" inquired Pascal.

But the marquis was again upon his guard. "I have a debt that must be paid this evening, at all hazards—a sacred obligation—in short, a debt of honour."

"A debt of one hundred thousand francs?"

"No, it is only twenty-five thousand."

"Is it possible that a rich man like you can be troubled about such a trifling sum, which any one would lend you?"

M. de Valorsay interrupted him a with contemptuous sneer. "Didn't you just tell me that we were living in an age when no one has any money except those who are in business? The richest of my friends have only enough for themselves, even if they have enough. The time of old stockings, stuffed full of savings, is past! Shall I apply to a banker? He would ask two days for reflection, and he would require the names of two or three of my friends on the note. If I go to my notary, there will be endless forms to be gone through, and remonstrances without number."

For a moment or more already, Pascal had been moving about uneasily on his chair, like a man who is waiting for an opportunity to make a suggestion, and as soon as M. de Valorsay paused to take breath, he exclaimed:—"Upon my word! if I dared—"

"Well?"

"I would offer to obtain you these twenty-five thousand francs."

"You?"

"Yes, I."

"Before six o'clock this evening?"

"Certainly."

A glass of ice-water presented to a parched traveller while journeying over the desert sands of Sahara could not impart greater relief and delight than the marquis experienced on hearing Pascal's offer. He literally felt that he was restored to life.

For ruin was inevitable if he did not succeed in obtaining twenty-five thousand francs that day. If he could procure that amount he might obtain a momentary respite, and to gain time was the main thing. Moreover, the offer was a sufficient proof that his financial difficulties were not known. "Ah! I have had a fortunate escape," he thought. "What if I had revealed the truth!"

But he was careful to conceal the secret joy that filled his heart. He feared lest he might say "Yes" too quickly, so betray his secret, and place himself at the mercy of the baron's envoy. "I would willingly accept your offer," he exclaimed, "if—"

"If what?"

"Would it be proper for me, after the baron has treated me in such a contemptible manner, to have any dealings with one of his subordinates?"

Pascal protested vigorously. "Allow me to say," he exclaimed, "that I am not any one's subordinate. Trigault is my client, like thirty or forty others—nothing more. He employs me in certain difficult and delicate negotiations, which I conduct to the best of my ability. He pays me, and we are each of us perfectly independent of the other."

From the look which Valorsay gave Pascal, one would have sworn that he suspected who his visitor really was. But such was not the case. It was simply this: a strange, but by no means impossible, idea had flashed through the marquis's mind—"Oh!" thought he, "this unknown party with whom Mauméjan offers to negotiate the loan, is probably none other than the baron himself. That worthy gambler has invented this ingenious method of obliging me so as to extort a rate of interest which he would not dare to demand openly. And why not? There have been plenty of such instances. Isn't it a well-known fact that the N——Brothers, the most rigidly honest financiers in the world, have never under any circumstances directly obliged one of their friends? If their own father, of whom they always speak with the greatest veneration, asked them to lend him fifty francs for a month, they would say to him as they do to every one else: 'We are rather cramped just now; but see that rascal B——' And that rascal B——, who is the most pliable tool in existence, will, providing father N—— offers unquestionable security, lend the old gentleman his son's money at from twelve to fifteen per cent. interest, plus a small commission."

These ideas and recollections were of considerable assistance in restoring Valorsay's composure. "Enough said, then," he answered, lightly. "I accept with pleasure. But—"

"Ah! so there is a but!"

"There is always one. I must warn you that it will be difficult for me to repay this loan in less than two months."

This, then, was the time he thought necessary for the accomplishment of his designs.

"That does not matter," replied Pascal, "and even if you desire a longer delay—"

"That will be unnecessary, thank you! But there is one thing more."

"What is that?"

"What will this negotiation cost me?"

Pascal had expected this question, and he had prepared a reply which was in perfect keeping with the spirit of the *rôle* he had assumed. "I shall charge you the ordinary rates," he answered, "six per cent. interest, plus one and-a-half per cent. commission."

"Bah!"

"Plus the remuneration for my trouble and services."

"And what remuneration will satisfy you?"

"One thousand francs. Is it too much?"

If the marquis had retained the shadow of a doubt, it vanished now. "Ah!" he sneered, "that strikes me as a very liberal compensation for your services!"

But he would gladly have recalled the sneer when he saw how the agent received it. Pascal drew up his head with a deeply injured air, and remarked in the chilling tone of a person who is strongly tempted to retract his word, "Then there is nothing more to he said, M. le Marquis; and since you find the conditions onerous—"

"I did not say so," interrupted M. de Valorsay, quickly—"I did not even think it!"

This gave Pascal an opportunity to present his programme, and he availed himself of it. "Others may pretend to oblige people merely from motives of friendship," he remarked. "But I am more honest. If I do anything in the way of business, I expect to be paid for it; and I vary my terms according to my clients' need. It would be impossible to have a fixed price for services like mine. When, on two different occasions, I saved a gentleman of your acquaintance from bankruptcy, I asked ten thousand francs the first time, and fifteen thousand the second. Was that an exaggerated estimate of my services? I might boast with truth that I once assured the marriage of a brilliant viscount by keeping his creditors quiet while his courtship was in progress. The day after the wedding he paid me twenty thousand francs. Didn't he owe them to me? If, instead of being a trifle short of money, you happened to be ruined, I should not ask you merely for a thousand francs. I should study your position, and fix my terms according to the magnitude of the peril from which I rescued you."

There was not a sentence, not a word of this cynical explanation which had not been carefully studied beforehand. There was not an expression which was not a tempting bait to the marquis's evil instincts. But M. de Valorsay made no sign. "I see that you are a shrewd man, Monsieur Mauméjan," said he, "and if I am ever in difficulty I shall apply to you."

Pascal bowed with an air of assumed modesty; but he was inwardly jubilant, for he felt that his enemy would certainly fall into the trap which had been set for him. "And now, when shall I have this money?" inquired the marquis.

"By four o'clock."

"And I need fear no disappointment as in the baron's case?"

"Certainly not. What interest would M. Trigault have in lending you a hundred thousand francs? None whatever. With me it is quite a different thing. The profit I'm to realise is your security. In business matters distrust your friends. Apply to usurers rather than to them. Question people who are in difficulties, and ninety-five out of a hundred will tell you that their worst troubles have been caused by those who called themselves their best friends."

He had risen to take leave, when the door of the smoking-room opened, and a servant appeared and said in an undertone: "Madame Léon is in the drawing-room with Dr. Jodon. They wish to see you, monsieur."

Though Pascal had armed himself well against any unexpected mischance, he changed colour on hearing the name of the worthy housekeeper. "All is lost if this creature sees and recognises me!" he thought.

Fortunately the marquis was too much engrossed in his own affairs to note the momentary agitation of Baron Trigault's envoy. "It is strange that I can't have five minutes' peace and quietness," he said. "I told you that I was at home to no one."

"But—"

"Enough! Let the lady and gentleman wait."

The servant withdrew.

The thought of passing out through the drawing-room filled Pascal with consternation. How could he hope to escape Madame Léon's keen eyes. Fortunately M. de Valorsay came to his relief, for as Pascal was about to open the same door by which he had entered, the marquis exclaimed: "Not that way! Pass out here—this is the shortest way."

And leading him through his bedroom the marquis conducted him to the staircase, where he even feigned to offer him his hand, saying: "A speedy return, dear M. Mauméjan."

It is not at the moment of peril that people endure the worst agony; it is afterwards, when they have escaped it. As he went down the staircase, Pascal wiped the cold sweat from his forehead. "Ah! it was a narrow escape!" he exclaimed, under his breath.

He felt proud of the manner in which he had sustained a part so repugnant to his nature. He was amazed to find that he could utter falsehoods with such a calm, unblushing face—he was astonished at his own audacity. And what a success he had achieved! He felt certain that he had just slipped round M. de Valorsay's neck the noose which would strangle him later on. Still he was considerably disturbed by Madame Léon's visit to the marquis. "What is she doing here with this physician?" he asked himself again and again. "Who is this man? What new piece of infamy are they plotting to require his services?" One of those presentiments which are prompted by the logic of events, told him that this physician had been, or would be, one of the actors in the vile conspiracy of which he and Mademoiselle Marguerite were the victims. But he had no leisure to devote to the solution of this enigma. Time was flying, and before returning to the marquis's house he must find out what had aroused the suspicions of the purchaser of those horses, the biographies of which had been so rigidly exacted. Through the baron, he might hope to obtain an interview with Kami-Bey—and so it was to the baron's house that Pascal directed his steps.

After the more than cordial reception which the baron had granted him that morning, it was quite natural that the servants should receive him as

a friend of the household. They would scarcely allow him to explain what he desired. It was the pompous head valet in person who ushered him into one of the small reception-rooms, exclaiming: "The baron's engaged, but I'm sure he would be annoyed if he failed to see you; and I will inform him at once."

A moment later, the baron entered quite breathless from his hurried descent of the staircase. "Ah! you have been successful," he exclaimed, on seeing Pascal's face.

"Everything is progressing as favourably as I could wish, Monsieur le Baron, but I must speak with that foreigner whom I met here this morning."

"Kami-Bey?"

"Yes." And in a few words, Pascal explained the situation.

"Providence is certainly on our side," said the baron, thoughtfully. "Kami is still here."

"Is it possible?"

"It's a fact. Did you think it would be easy to get rid of this confounded Turk! He invited himself to breakfast without the slightest ceremony, and would give me no peace until I promised to play with him for two hours. I was closeted with him, cards in hand, when they told me you were here. Come, we'll go and question him."

They found the interesting foreigner in a savage mood. He had been winning when the servant came for the baron, and he feared that an interruption would change the luck. "What the devil took you away?" he exclaimed, with that coarseness of manner which was habitual with him, and which the flatterers around him styled "form." "A man should no more be disturbed when he's playing than when he's eating."

"Come, come, prince," said the baron, good-naturedly, "don't be angry, and I'll give you three hours instead of two. But I have a favour to ask of you."

The foreigner at once thrust his hand into his pocket, with such a natural gesture, that neither the baron nor Pascal could repress a smile, and he himself understanding the cause of their merriment broke into a hearty laugh. "It's purely from force of habit," said he. "Ah! since I've been in Paris— But what do you wish?"

The baron sat down, and gravely replied: "You told us scarcely an hour ago that you had been cheated in the purchase of some horses."

"Cheated! it was worse than highway robbery."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask you by whom you have been defrauded?"

Kami-Bey's purple cheeks became a trifle pale. "Hum!" said he, in an altered tone of voice, "that is a delicate question. My defrauder appears to be a dangerous fellow—a duellist—and if I disclose his knavery, he is quite capable of picking a quarrel with me—not that I am afraid of him, I assure you, but my principles don't allow me to fight. When a man has an income of a million, he doesn't care to expose himself to the dangers of a duel."

"But, prince, in France folks don't do a scoundrel the honour to cross swords with him."

"That's just what my steward, who is a Frenchman, told me; but no matter. Besides, I am not sufficiently sure of the man's guilt to noise it abroad. I have no positive proofs as yet."

He was evidently terribly frightened, and the first thing to be done was to reassure him. "Come," insisted the baron, "tell us the man's name.

This gentleman here"—pointing to Pascal—"is one of my most esteemed friends. I will answer for him as I would for myself; and we will swear upon our honour not to reveal the secret we ask you for, without your permission."

"Truly?"

"You have our word of honour," replied both the baron and Pascal in a breath.

After casting a half-frightened glance around him, the worthy Turk seemed to gather courage. But no! He deliberated some time, and then rejoined: "Really, I'm not sufficiently convinced of the accuracy of my suspicions to incur the risk of accusing a man who belongs in the very best society; a man who is very rich and very highly respected, and who would tolerate no imputations upon his character."

It was plain that he would not speak. The baron shrugged his shoulders, but Pascal stepped bravely forward. "Then I will tell you, prince," he said, "the name that you are determined to hide from us."

"Oh!"

"But you must allow me to remark that the baron and myself retract the promise we made you just now."

"Naturally."

"Then, your defrauder is the Marquis de Valorsay?"

If Kami-Bey had seen an emissary of his sovereign enter the room carrying the fatal bow-string he would not have seemed more terror-stricken. He sprang nervously on to his short, fat legs, his eyes wildly dilating and his hands fluttering despairingly. "Don't speak so loud! don't speak so loud!" he exclaimed, imploringly.

As he did not even attempt to deny it, the truth of the assertion might be taken for granted. But Pascal was not content with this. "Now that we know the fact, I hope, prince, that you will be sufficiently obliging to tell us how it all happened," he remarked.

Poor Kami. He was in despair. "Alas!" he replied, reluctantly, "nothing could be more simple. I wanted to set up a racing stable. Not that I care much for sport. I can scarcely distinguish a horse from a mule—but morning and evening, everybody says to me: 'Prince, a man like you ought to make your name celebrated on the turf.' Besides I never open a paper without reading: 'Such a man ought to be a patron of the noblest of sports.' At last, I said to myself: 'Yes they are right. I ought to take part in racing.' So I began to look about for some horses. I had purchased several, when the Marquis de Valorsay proposed to sell me some of his, some that were very well known and that had—so he assured me—won at least ten times the amount they had cost him. I accepted his offer, and visited his stables, where I selected seven of his best horses and paid for them; and I paid a good round price, I assure you. Now comes the knavery. He has not given me the horses I purchased. The real animals, the valuable ones—have been sold in England under false names, and although the horses sent to me may be like the others in appearance, they are really only common animals, wanting both in blood and speed."

Pascal and the baron exchanged astonished glances. It must be confessed that frauds of every description are common enough in the racing world, and a great deal of dishonest manœuvring results from greed for gain united with the fever for gambling. But never before had any one been accused of such an audacious and impudent piece of rascality as that which Kami-Bey imputed to Valorsay.

"How did you fail to discover this at the outset, prince?" inquired Pascal in an incredulous tone.

"Because my time was so much occupied."

"But your servants?"

"Ah! that's another thing. I shouldn't be at all surprised if it were proved that the man who has charge of my stables had been bribed by the marquis."

"Then, how were your suspicions aroused?"

"It was only by the merest chance. A jockey whom I thought of employing had often ridden one of the animals which I fancied myself the owner of. Naturally, I showed him the horse, but he had no sooner set eyes on it than he exclaimed: 'That the horse! Never! You've been cheated, prince!' Then we examined the others, and the fraud became apparent."

Knowing Kami's character better than Pascal, the baron had good reason to distrust the accuracy of these statements. For the Turkish millionaire's supberb contempt of money was only affected. Vanity alone unloosed his purse strings. He was quite capable of presenting Jenny Fancy with a necklace costing five-and-twenty thousand francs for the sake of seeing his generosity recorded in the *Gaulois* or the *Figaro* the next day; but he would refuse to give a trifle to the mother of a starving family. Besides, it was his ambition to be regarded as the most swindled man in Europe. But though he was shamefully imposed upon, it was not voluntarily—for there was a strong dose of Arabian avarice and distrust in his composition.

"Frankly, prince," said the baron, "your story sounds like one of the wild legends of your native land. Valorsay is certainly no fool. How is it possible that he could have been guilty of so gross a fraud—a fraud which might be, which could not fail to be discovered in twenty-four hours—and which, once proven, would dishonour him forever?"

"Before perpetrating such a piece of deception upon any one else, he would have thought twice; but upon me it's different. Isn't it an established fact that a person incurs no risk in robbing Kami-Bey?"

"Had I been in your place I should have quietly instituted an investigation."

"What good would that have done? Besides, the sale was only conditional, and took place under the seal of secrecy. The marquis reserved the right to take his horses back on payment of a stipulated sum, and the time he was to have for consideration only expired on the day before yesterday."

"Eh! why didn't you tell us that at first?" cried the baron.

The marquis's rascality was now easily explained. Finding himself in a desperate strait, and feeling that his salvation was certain if he could only gain a little time, he had yielded to temptation, saying to himself, like unfaithful cashiers when they first appropriate their employers' money: "I will pay it back, and no one will ever know it!" However when the day of settlement came he had found himself in as deplorable a plight as on the day of the robbery, and he had been compelled to yield to the force of circumstances.

"And what do you intend to do, prince?" asked Pascal.

"Ah! I am still in doubt. I have compelled the marquis to give me the papers in which the exploits of these horses are recorded. These statements will be of service in case of a law-suit. But shall I or shall I not enter a complaint against him? If it were a mere question of money I

should let the matter drop; but he has defrauded and deceived me so outrageously that it annoys me. On the other hand, to confess that he has cheated me in this fashion would cover me with ridicule. Besides, the man is a dangerous enemy. And what would become of me if I happened to side against him? I should be compelled to leave Paris. Ah! I'd give ten thousand francs to any one who'd settle this cursed affair for me!"

His perplexity was so great, and his anger so intense, for that once he tore off his eternal fez and flung it on to the table, swearing like a drayman. However, controlling himself at last, he exclaimed in a tone of assumed indifference: "No matter, there's been enough said on this subject for one day—I'm here to play—so let us begin, baron. For we are wasting precious time, as you so often remark."

Pascal had nothing more to learn; so he shook hands with the baron, made an appointment with him for the same evening, and went away.

It was only half past two; a good hour and a half remained at his disposal. "I will profit by this opportunity to eat something," he thought; a sudden faintness reminding him that he had taken nothing but a cup of chocolate that day. Thereupon perceiving a café near by, he entered it, ordered breakfast, and lingered there until it was time to return to the Marquis de Valorsay's. He would have gone there before the appointed time if he had merely listened to the promptings of his impatience, so thoroughly was he persuaded that this second interview would be decisive. But prudence advised him not to expose himself to the danger of an encounter with Madame Léon and Dr. Jodon.

"Well! Monsieur Mauméjan," cried the marquis, as soon as Pascal made his appearance. He had been counting the seconds with intense anxiety, as his tone of voice unmistakeably revealed.

In reply Pascal gravely drew from his pocket twenty-four bank-notes, of a thousand francs each, and he placed them upon the table, saying: "Here is the amount, Monsieur le Marquis. I have, of course, deducted my commission. Now, if you will write and sign a note for twenty-five thousand francs, payable to my order two months hence, our business for to-day will be concluded."

M. de Valorsay's hand trembled nervously as he penned the desired note, for, until the very last moment, he had doubted the promises of this unknown agent who had made his appearance so opportunely. Then, when the document was signed, he carelessly slipped the money into a drawer and exclaimed: "So here's the needful to pay my debt of honour; but my embarrassment is none the less great. These twenty-four thousand francs won't take the place of the hundred thousand which Baron Trigault promised me."

And, as Pascal made no reply, the marquis began a desultory tramp up and down the smoking-room. He was very pale, his brows were knit; he looked like a man who was meditating a decisive step, and who was calculating the consequences. But having no time to waste in hesitation, he soon paused in front of Pascal, and exclaimed: "Since you have just lent me twenty-four thousand francs, why won't you lend me the rest?"

But Pascal shook his head. "One risks nothing by advancing twenty-five thousand francs to a person in your position, Monsieur le Marquis. Whatever happens, such a sum as that can always be gathered from the wreck. But double or triple the amount! The deuce! that requires reflection, and I must understand the situation thoroughly."

"And if I told you that I am—almost ruined, what would you reply?"

"I shouldn't be so very much surprised."

M. de Valorsay had now gone too far to draw back. "Ah, well!" he resumed, "the truth is this—my affairs are terribly involved."

"The devil! You should have told me that sooner."

"Wait; I am about to retrieve my fortune—to make it even larger than it has ever been. I am on the point of contracting a marriage which will make me one of the richest men in Paris; but I must have a little time to bring the affair to a successful termination, and I need money—and my creditors are pressing me unmercifully. You told me this morning that you once assisted a man who was in a similar position. Will you help me? You can set your own price on your services."

More easily overcome by joy than by sorrow, Pascal almost betrayed himself. He had attained his object. Still, he succeeded in conquering his emotion, and it was in a perfectly calm voice that he replied: "I can promise nothing until I understand the situation, Monsieur le Marquis. Will you explain it to me? I am listening."

XIV.

It was nearly midnight when M. Wilkie left the Hôtel d'Argelès after the terrible scene in which he had revealed his true character. On seeing him pass out with haggard eyes, colourless lips, and disordered clothing, the servants gathered in the vestibule took him at first for another of those ruined gamblers who not unfrequently left the house with despair in their hearts.

"Another fellow who's had bad luck!" they remarked sneeringly to one another.

"No doubt about that. He is pretty effectually used up, judging from appearances," one of them remarked.

It was not until some moments later that they learned a portion of the truth through the servants who had been on duty up-stairs, and who now ran down in great terror, crying that Madame d'Argelès was dying, and that a physician must be summoned at once.

M. Wilkie was already far away, hastening up the boulevard with an agile step. Any one else would have been overcome with shame and sorrow—would have been frightened by the thought of what he had done, and have striven to find some way to conceal his disgrace; but he, not in the least. In this frightful crisis, he was only conscious of one fact—that just as he raised his hand to strike Madame Lia d'Argelès, his mother, a big, burly individual had burst into the room, like a bombshell, caught him by the throat, forced him upon his knees, and compelled him to ask the lady's pardon. He, Wilkie, to be humiliated in this style! He would never endure that. This was an affront he could not swallow, one of those insults that cry out for vengeance and for blood. "Ah! the great brute shall pay for it," he repeated, again and again, grinding his teeth. And if he hastened up the boulevard, it was only because he hoped to meet his two chosen friends, M. Costard and the Viscount de Serpillon, the co-proprietors of Pompier de Nanterre.

For he intended to place his outraged honour in their care. They should be his seconds, and present his demand for satisfaction to the man who had insulted him. A duel was the only thing that could appease his furious anger and heal his wounded pride. And a great scandal, which he would

be the hero of, was not without a certain charm for him. What a glorious chance to win notoriety at an epoch when newspapers have become public laundries, in which every one washes his soiled linen and dries it in the glare of publicity! He saw his already remarkable reputation enhanced by the interest that always attaches to people who are talked about, and he could hear in advance the flattering whisper which would greet his appearance everywhere: "You see that young man?—he is the hero of that famous adventure," &c. Moreover, he was already twisting and turning the terms of the notice which his seconds must have inserted in the *Figaro*, hesitating between two or three equally startling beginnings: "Another famous duel," or "Yesterday, after a scandalous scene, an encounter," &c., &c.

Unfortunately, he did not meet either M. Costard or the Viscount de Serpillon. Strange to say, they were not in any of the cafés, where the flower of French chivalry usually congregates, in the company of golden-haired young women, from nine in the evening until one o'clock in the morning. This disappointment grieved M. Wilkie sorely, although he derived some benefit from it, for his disordered attire attracted attention at each place he entered, and acquaintances eagerly inquired: "Where have you come from, and what has happened to you?" Whereupon he replied with an air of profound secrecy: "Pray don't speak of it. A shocking affair! If it were noised abroad I should be inconsolable."

At last the cafés began to close, and promenaders became rare. M. Wilkie, much to his regret, was obliged to go home. When he had locked his door and donned his dressing-gown, he sat down to think over the events of the day, and collect his scattered wits. What most troubled and disquieted him was not the condition in which he had left Madame Lia d'Argelès, his mother, who was, perhaps, dying, through his fault! It was not the terrible sacrifice that this poor woman had made for him in a transport of maternal love! It was not the thought of the source from which the money he had squandered for so many years had been derived. No, M. Wilkie was quite above such paltry considerations—good enough for commonplace and antiquated people. "He was too clever for that. Ah! yes. He had a stronger stomach, and was up with the times!" If he were sorely vexed in spirit it was because he thought that the immense property which he had believed his own had slipped, perhaps for ever, from his grasp. For rising threateningly between the Chalusse millions and himself, he pictured the form of his father, this man whom he did not know, but whose very name had made Madame d'Argelès shudder.

M. Wilkie was seized with terror when he looked his actual situation in the face. What was to become of him? He was certain that Madame d'Argelès would not give him another sou. She could not—he recognised that fact. His intelligence was equal to that. On the other hand if he ever obtained anything from the count's estate, which was more than doubtful, would he not be obliged to wait a long time for it? Yes, in all probability such would be the case. Then how should he live, how would he be able to obtain food in the meantime? His despair was so poignant that tears came to his eyes; and he bitterly deplored the step he had taken. Yes, he actually sighed for the past; he longed to live over again the very years in which he had so often complained of his destiny. Then, though not a millionaire by any means, he at least wanted for nothing. Every quarter-day a very considerable allowance was promptly paid him, and, in great emergencies, he could apply to Mr. Patterson, who always sent a

favourable answer if not drawn upon too heavily. Yes, he sighed for that time! Ah! if he had only then realised, how fortunate he was! Had he not been one of the most opulent members of the society in which he moved? Had he not been flattered and admired more than any of his companions? Had he not found the most exquisite happiness in his part ownership of Pompier de Nanterre!

Now, what remained? Nothing, save anxiety concerning the future, and all sorts of uncertainties and terrors! What a mistake!—What a blunder he had made! Ah! if he could only begin again. He sincerely wished that the great adversary of mankind had the Viscount de Coralth in his clutches. For, in his despair, it was the once dear viscount that he blamed, accused, and cursed.

He was in this ungrateful frame of mind when a loud almost savage ring came at his door. As his servant slept in an attic upstairs, Wilkie was quite alone in his rooms, so he took the lamp and went to open the door himself. At this hour of the night, the visitor could only be M. Costard or the Viscount de Serpillon, or perhaps both of them. "They have heard that I was looking for them, and so they have hastened here," he thought.

But he was mistaken. The visitor was neither of these gentlemen, but M. Ferdinand de Coralth in person. Prudence had compelled the viscount to leave Madame d'Argelès' card-party one of the last, but as soon as he was out of the house he had rushed to the Marquis de Valorsay's to hold a conference with him, far from suspecting that he was followed, and that an auxiliary of Pascal Ferailleur and Mademoiselle Marguerite was even then waiting for him below—an enemy as formidable as he was humble—Victor Chupin.

At sight of the man who had so long been his model—the friend who had advised what he styled his blunder—Wilkie was so surprised that he almost dropped his lamp. Then as his wrath kindled, "Ah! so it's you!" he exclaimed, angrily. "You come at a good time!"

But M. de Coralth was too much exasperated to notice Wilkie's strange greeting. Seizing him roughly by the arm, and closing the door with a kick, he dragged Wilkie back into the little drawing-room. "Yes, it's I," he said, curtly, "It's I—come to inquire if you have gone mad?"

"Viscount!"

"I can find no other explanation of your conduct! What! You choose Madame d'Argelès' reception day, and an hour when there are fifty guests in her drawing-room to present yourself!"

"Ah, well! it wasn't from choice. I had been there twice before, and had the doors shut in my face."

"You ought to have gone back ten times, a hundred times, a thousand time, rather than have accomplished such an idiotic prank as this."

"Excuse me."

"What did I recommend? Prudence, calmness and moderation, persuasive gentleness, sentiments of the loftiest nature, tenderness, a shower of tears—"

"Possibly, but—"

"But instead of that, you fall upon this woman like a thunderbolt, and set the whole household in the wildest commotion. What could you be thinking of, to make such an absurd and frightful scene? For you howled and shrieked like a street hawker, and we could hear you in the drawing-room. If all is not irretrievably lost, there must be a special Providence for the benefit of fools!"

In his dismay, Wilkie endeavoured to falter some excuses, but he was only able to begin a few sentences which died away, uncompleted in his throat. The violence shewn by M. de Coralth, who was usually as cold and as polished as marble, quieted his own wrath. Still towards the last he felt disposed to rebel against the insults that were being heaped upon him. "Do you know, viscount, that I begin to think this very strange," he exclaimed. "If any one else had led me into such a scrape, I should have called him to account in double quick time."

M. de Coralth shrugged his shoulders with an air of contempt, and threateningly replied: "Understand, once for all, that you had better not attempt to bully me! Now, tell me what passed between your mother and yourself?"

"First I should like—"

"Dash it all! Do you suppose that I intend to remain here all night? Tell me what occurred, and be quick about it. And try to speak the truth."

It was one of M. Wilkie's greatest boasts that he had an indomitable will—an iron nature. But the viscount exercised powerful influence over him, and, to tell the truth, inspired him with a form of emotion which was nearly akin to fear. Moreover a glimmer of reason had at last penetrated his befogged brain: he saw that M. de Coralth was right—that he had acted like a fool, and that, if he hoped to escape from the dangers that threatened him, he must take the advice of more experienced men than himself. So, ceasing his recriminations, he began to describe what he styled his explanation with Madame d'Argelès. All went well at first; for he dared not misrepresent the facts.

But when he came to the intervention of the man who had prevented him from striking his mother, he turned crimson, and rage again filled his heart. "I'm sorry I let myself get into such a mess!" he exclaimed. "You should have seen my condition. My shirt-collar was torn, and my cravat hung in tatters. He was much stronger than I—the contemptible scoundrel!—ah! if it hadn't been for that— But I shall have my revenge. Yes, he shall learn that he can't trample a man under foot with impunity. To-morrow two of my friends will call upon him; and if he refuses to apologize or to give me satisfaction, I'll cane him."

It was evident enough that M. de Coralth had to exercise considerable constraint to listen to these fine projects. "I must warn you that you ought to speak in other terms of an honourable and honoured gentleman," he interrupted, at last.

"Eh! what! You know him then?"

"Yes, Madame d'Argelès defender is Baron Trigault."

M. Wilkie's heart bounded with joy, as he heard this name. "Ah! this is capital!" he exclaimed. "What! So it was Baron Trigault—the noted gambler—who owns such a magnificent house in the Rue de la Ville l'Evêque, the husband of that extremely stylish lady, that notorious *cocotte*—"

The viscount sprang from his chair, and interrupting M. Wilkie: "I advise you, for the sake of your own safety," he said, measuring his words to give them greater weight, "never to mention the Baroness Trigault's name except in terms of the most profound respect."

There was no misunderstanding M. de Coralth's tone, and his glance said plainly that he would not allow much time to pass before putting his threat into execution. Having always lived in a lower circle to that in which the

baroness sparkled with such lively brilliancy, M. Wilkie was ignorant of the reasons that induced his distinguished friend to defend her so warmly; but he *did* understand that it would be highly imprudent to insist, or even to discuss the matter. So, in his most persuasive manner, he resumed: "Let us say no more about the wife, but give our attention to the husband. So it was the baron who insulted me! A duel with him—what good luck! Well! he may sleep in peace to-night, but as soon as he is up in the morning he will find Costard and Serpillon on hand. Serpillon has not an equal as a second. First, he knows the best places for a meeting; then he lends the combatants weapons when they have none; he procures a physician; and he is on excellent terms with the journalists, who publish reports of these encounters."

The viscount had never had a very exalted opinion of Wilkie's intelligence, but now he was amazed to see how greatly he had over-estimated it. "Enough of such foolishness," he interrupted, curtly. "This duel will never take place."

"I should like to know who will prevent it?"

"I will, if you persist in such an absurd idea. You ought to have sense enough to know that the baron would kick Serpillon out of the house, and that you would only cover yourself with ridicule. So, between your duel and my help make your choice, and quickly."

The prospect of sending his seconds to demand satisfaction from Baron Trigault was certainly a very attractive one. But, on the other hand, Wilkie could not afford to dispense with M. de Coralth's services. "But the baron has insulted me," he urged.

"Well, you can demand satisfaction when you obtain possession of your property; but the least scandal now would spoil your last chances."

"I will abandon the project, then," sighed Wilkie, despondently; "but pray advise me. What do you think of my situation?"

M. de Coralth seemed to consider a moment, and then gravely replied: "I think that, *unassisted*, you have no chance whatever. You have no standing, no influential connections, no position—you are not even a Frenchman."

"Alas! that is precisely what I have said to myself."

"Still, I am convinced that with some assistance you might overcome your mother's resistance, and even your father's pretentions."

"Yes, but where could I find protectors?"

The viscount's gravity seemed to increase. "Listen to me," said he; "I will do for you what I would not do for any one else. I will endeavour to interest in your cause one of my friends, who is all powerful by reason of his name, his fortune, and his connections—the Marquis de Valorsay, in fact."

"The one who is so well known upon the turf?"

"The same."

"And you will introduce me to him?"

"Yes. Be ready to-morrow at eleven o'clock, and I will call for you and take you to his house. If he interests himself in your cause, it is as good as gained." And as his companion overwhelmed him with thanks, he rose, and said: "I must go now. No more foolishness, and be ready to-morrow at the appointed time."

Thanks to the surprising mutability of temper which was the most striking characteristic of his nature, M. Wilkie was already consoled for his blunder.

He had received M. de Coralth as an enemy; but he now escorted him to the door with every obsequious attention—in fact, just as if he looked upon him as his preserver. A word which the viscount had dropped during the conversation had considerably helped to bring about this sudden revulsion of feelings. "You cannot fail to understand that if the Marquis de Valorsay espouses your cause, you will want for nothing. And if a lawsuit is unavoidable, he will be perfectly willing to advance the necessary funds." How could M. Wilkie lack confidence after that? The brightest hopes, the most ecstatic visions had succeeded the gloomy forebodings of a few hours before. The mere thought of being presented to M. de Valorsay, a nobleman celebrated for his adventures, his horses, and his fortune, more than sufficed to make him forget his troubles. What rapture to become that illustrious nobleman's acquaintance, perhaps his friend! To move in the same orbit as this star of the first magnitude which would inevitably cast some of its lustre upon him! Now he would be a somebody in the world. He felt that he had grown a head taller, and Heaven only knows with what disdain poor Costard and Serpillon would have been received had they chanced to present themselves at that moment.

It is needless to say that Wilkie dressed with infinite care on the following morning, no doubt in the hope of making a conquest of the marquis at first sight. He tried his best to solve the problem of appearing at the same time most *recherché* but at ease, excessively elegant and yet unostentatious; and he devoted himself to the task so unreservedly that he lost all conception of the flight of time: so that on seeing M. de Coralth enter his rooms, he exclaimed in unfeigned astonishment: "You here already?"

It seemed to him that barely five minutes had elapsed since he took his place before the looking-glass to study attitudes and gestures, with a new and elegant mode of bowing and sitting down, like an actor practising the effects which are to win him applause.

"Why do you say 'already?'" replied the viscount. "I am a quarter of an hour behind time. Are you not ready?"

"Yes, certainly."

"Let us start at once, then; my brougham is outside."

The drive was a silent one. M. Ferdinand de Coralth, whose smooth white skin would ordinarily have excited the envy of a young girl, did not look like himself. His face was swollen and covered with blotches, and there were dark blue circles round his eyes. He seemed, moreover, to be in a most savage humour. "He hasn't had sleep enough," thought M. Wilkie, with his usual discernment: "he hasn't a bronze constitution like myself."

M. Wilkie himself was insensible to fatigue, and although he had not closed his eyes the previous night, he only felt that nervous trepidation which invariably attacks *débutants*, and makes the throat so marvellously dry. For the first, and probably the last time in his life, M. Wilkie distrusted his own powers, and feared that he was not "quite up to the mark," as he elegantly expressed it.

The sight of the Marquis de Valorsay's handsome mansion was not likely to restore his assurance. When he entered the courtyard, where the master's mail-phaeton stood in waiting; when through the open doors of the handsome stables he espied the many valuable horses neighing in their stalls, and the numerous carriages shrouded in linen covers; when he counted the valets on duty in the vestibule, and when he ascended the staircase behind a lackey attired in a black dress-coat, and as serious in mien as a notary; when he passed through the handsome drawing-rooms,

filled to overflowing with pictures, armour, statuary, and all the trophies gained by the marquis's horses upon the turf, M. Wilkie mentally acknowledged that he knew nothing of high life, and that what he had considered luxury was scarcely the shadow of the reality. He felt actually ashamed of his own ignorance. This feeling of inferiority became so powerful that he was almost tempted to turn and fly, when the man clothed in black opened the door and announced, in a clear voice: "M. le Vicomte de Coralth!—M. Wilkie."

With a most gracious and dignified air—the air of a true *grand* seigneur—the only portion of his inheritance which he had preserved intact, the marquis rose to his feet, and, offering his hand to M. de Coralth, exclaimed: "You are most welcome, viscount. This gentleman is undoubtedly the young friend you spoke of in the note I received from you this morning?"

"The same; and really he stands greatly in need of your kindness. He finds himself in an extremely delicate position, and knows no one who can lend him a helping hand."

"Ah, well, I will lend him one with pleasure, since he is your friend. But I must know the circumstances before I can act. Sit down, gentlemen, and enlighten me."

M. Wilkie had prepared his story in advance, a touching and witty narrative; but when the moment came to begin it, he found himself unable to speak. He opened his mouth, but no sound issued from his lips, and it seemed as if he had been stricken dumb. Accordingly it was M. de Coralth who made a statement of the case, and he did it well. The narrative thus gained considerably in clearness and precision; and even M. Wilkie noticed that his friend understood how to present the events in their most favourable light, and how to omit them altogether when his heartless conduct would have appeared too odious. He also noticed—and he considered it an excellent omen—that M. de Valorsay was listening with the closest attention.

Worthy marquis! if his own interests had been in jeopardy he could not have appeared more deeply concerned. When the viscount had concluded his story, he gravely exclaimed: "Your young friend is indeed in a most critical position, a position from which he cannot escape without being terribly victimized, if he's left dependent on his own resources."

"But it is understood that you will help him, is it not?"

M. de Valorsay reflected for a little, and then, addressing M. Wilkie, replied: "Yes, I consent to assist you, monsieur. First, because your cause seems to me just, and, also, because you are M. de Coralth's friend. I promise you my aid on one condition—that you will follow my advice implicitly."

The interesting young man lifted his hand, and, by dint of a powerful effort, he succeeded in articulating: "Anything you wish!—upon my sacred word!"

"You must understand that when I engage in an enterprise, it must not fail. The eye of the public is upon me, and I have my *prestige* to maintain. I have given you a great mark of confidence, for in lending you my influence I become, in some measure at least, your sponsor. But I cannot accept this great responsibility unless I am allowed absolute control of the affair."

"Of course."

"And I think that we ought to begin operations this very day. The main thing is to circumvent your father, the terrible man with whom your mother has threatened you."

"Ah! but how?"

"I shall dress at once and go to the Hôtel de Chalusse, in order to ascertain what has occurred there. You on your side must hasten to Madame d'Argelès and request her politely, but firmly, to furnish you with the necessary proofs to assert your rights. If she consents, well and good! If she refuses, we will consult some lawyer as to the next step. In any case call here again at four o'clock."

But the thought of meeting Madame d'Argelès again was anything but pleasing to Wilkie. "I would willingly yield that undertaking to some one else," said he. "Cannot some one else go in my place?"

Fortunately M. de Coralth knew how to encourage him. "What! are you afraid?" he asked.

Afraid! he?—never! It was easy to see that by the way he settled his hat on his head and went off, slamming the door noisily behind him.

"What an idiot!" muttered M. de Coralth. "And to think that there are ten thousand in Paris built upon the very same plan!"

M. de Valorsay gravely shook his head. "Let us thank fortune that he is as he is. No youth who possessed either heart or intelligence would play the part that I intend for him, and enable me to obtain proud Marguerite and her millions. But I fear he won't go to Madame d'Argelès' house. You noticed his repugnance!"

"Oh, you needn't trouble yourself in the least on that account—he'll go. He would go to the devil if the noble Marquis de Valorsay ordered him to do so."

M. de Coralth understood Wilkie perfectly. The fear of being considered a coward by a nobleman like the Marquis de Valorsay was more than sufficient, not only to divest him of all his scruples, but even to induce him to commit any act of folly, or actually a crime. For if he had looked upon M. de Coralth as an oracle, he considered the marquis to be a perfect god.

Accordingly, as he hastened towards Madame d'Argelès' residence, he said to himself: "Why shouldn't I go to her house? I've done her no injury. Besides, she won't eat me." And remembering that he should be obliged to render a report of this interview, he resolved to assert his superiority and to remain cool and unmoved, as he had seen M. de Coralth do so often.

However, the unusual aspect of the house excited his surprise, and puzzled him not a little. Three huge furniture vans, heavily laden, were standing outside the gate. In the courtyard there were two more vehicles of the same description, which a dozen men or so were busily engaged in loading. "Ah, ha!" muttered M. Wilkie, "it was fortunate that I came —very fortunate; so she was going to run away!" Thereupon, approaching a group of servants who were in close conference in the hall, he demanded, in his most imperious manner: "Madame d'Argelès!"

The servants remembered the visitor perfectly; they now knew who he really was, and they could not understand how he could have the impudence and audacity to come there again so soon after the shameful scene of the previous evening. "Madame is at home," replied one of the men, in anything but a polite tone; "and I will go and see if she will consent to see you. Wait here."

He went off, leaving M. Wilkie in the vestibule to settle his collar and twirl his puny moustaches, with affected indifference; but in reality he was far from comfortable. For the servants did not hesitate to stare at him,

and it was quite impossible not to read their contempt in their glances. They even sneered audibly and pointed at him; and he heard five or six epithets more expressive than elegant which could only have been meant for himself. "The fools!" thought he, boiling with anger. "The scoundrels! Ah! if I dared— If a gentleman like myself was allowed to notice such blackguards, how I'd chastise them!"

But the valet who had gone to warn Madame d'Argelès soon reappeared and put an end to his sufferings. "Madame will see you," said the man, impudently. "Ah! if I were in her place—"

"Come, make haste," rejoined Wilkie, indignantly, and following the servant, he was ushered into a room which had already been divested of its hangings, curtains, and furniture. He here found Madame d'Argéles engaged in packing a large trunk with household linen and sundry articles of clothing.

By a sort of miracle the unfortunate woman had survived the terrible shock which had at first threatened to have an immediately fatal effect. Still she had none the less received her death-blow. It was only necessary to look at her to be assured of that. She was so greatly changed that when M. Wilkie's eyes first fell on her, he asked himself if this were really the same person whom he had met on the previous evening. Henceforth she would be an old woman. You would have taken her for over fifty, so terrible had been the sufferings caused her by the shameful conduct of her son. In this sad-eyed, haggard-faced woman, clad in black, no one would have recognized the notorious Lia d'Argelès, who, only the evening before, had driven round the lake, reclining on the cushions of her victoria, and eclipsing all the women around her by the splendour of her toilette. Nothing now remained of the gay worldling but the golden hair which she was condemned to see always the same, since its tint had been fixed by dyes as indelible as the stains upon her past.

She rose with difficulty when M. Wilkie entered, and in the expressionless voice of those who are without hope, she asked: "What do you wish of me?"

As usual, when the time came to carry out his happiest conceptions, his courage failed him. "I came to talk about our affairs, you know," he replied, "and I find you moving."

"I am not moving."

"Nonsense! you can't make me believe that! What's the meaning of these carts in the courtyard?"

"They are here to convey all the furniture in the house to the auction-rooms."

Wilkie was struck dumb for a moment, but eventually recovering himself a little, he exclaimed: "What! you are going to sell everything?"

"Yes."

"Astonishing, upon my honour!—But afterwards?"

"I shall leave Paris."

"Bah! and where are you going?"

With a gesture of utter indifference, she gently replied: "I don't know; I shall go where no one will know me, and where it will be possible for me to hide my shame."

A terrible disquietude seized hold of Wilkie. This sudden change of residence, this departure which so strongly resembled flight, this cold greeting when he expected passionate reproaches, seemed to indicate that Madame d'Argelès' resolution would successfully resist any amount of en-

treaty on his part. "The devil," he remarked, "I don't think this at all pleasant! What is to become of *me?* How am I to obtain possession of the Count de Chalusse's estate? That's what I am after! It's rightfully mine, and I'm determined to have it, as I told you once before. And when I've once taken anything into my head—"

He paused, for he could no longer face the scornful glances that Madame d'Argelès was giving him. "Don't be alarmed," she replied bitterly, "I shall leave you the means of asserting your right to my parents' estate."

"Ah—so—"

"Your threats obliged me to decide contrary to my own wishes. I felt that no amount of slander or disgrace would daunt you."

"Of course not, when so many millions are at stake."

"I reflected, and I saw that nothing would arrest you upon your downward path except a large fortune. If you were poor and compelled to earn your daily bread—a task which you are probably incapable of performing—who can tell what depths of degradation you might descend to? With your instincts and your vices, who knows what crime you wouldn't commit to obtain money? It wouldn't be long before you were in the dock, and I should hear of you only through your disgrace. But, on the other hand, if you were rich, you would probably lead an honest life, like many others, who, wanting for nothing, are not tempted to do wrong, who, in fact, shew virtue in which there is nothing worthy of praise. For real virtue implies temptation—a struggle and victory."

Although he did not understand these remarks very well, M. Wilkie evinced a desire to offer some objections; but Madame d'Argelès had already resumed: "So I went to my notary this morning. I told him everything; and by this time my renunciation of my rights to the estate of the Count de Chalusse is already recorded."

"What! your renunciation. Oh! no."

"Allow me to finish since you don't understand me. As soon as I renounce the inheritance it becomes yours."

"Truly?"

"I have no wish to deceive you. I only desire that the name of Lia d'Argelès should not be mentioned. I will give you the necessary proofs to establish your identity; my marriage contract and your certificate of birth."

It was joy that made M. Wilkie speechless now. "And when will you give me these documents?" he faltered, after a short pause.

"You shall have them before you leave this house; but first of all I must talk with you."

XV.

AGITATED and excited though he was, M. Wilkie had not once ceased to think of M. de Coralth and the Marquis de Valorsay. What would they do in such a position, and how should he act to conform himself to the probable example of these models of deportment? Manifestly he ought to assume that stolid and insolent air of boredom which is considered a sure indication of birth and breeding. Convinced of this, and seized with a laudable desire to emulate such distinguished examples, he had perched himself upon a trunk, where he still sat with his legs crossed. He now pretended to suppress a yawn, as he growled, "What! some more long phrases—and another melodramatic display?"

Absorbed in the memories she had invoked, Madame d'Argelès paid no

heed to Wilkie's impertinence. "Yes, I must talk with you," she said, "and more for your sake than for my own. I must tell you who I am, and through what strange vicissitudes I have passed. You know what family I belong to. I will tell you, however—for you may be ignorant of the fact—that our house is the equal of any in France in lineage, splendour of alliance, and fortune. When I was a child, my parents lived at the Hôtel de Chalusse, in the Faubourg Saint Germain, a perfect palace, surrounded by one of those immense gardens, which are no longer seen in Paris—a real park, shaded with century-old trees. Certainly everything that money could procure, or vanity desire, was within my reach; and yet my youth was wretchedly unhappy. I scarcely knew my father, who was devoured by ambition, and had thrown himself body and soul into the vortex of politics. Either my mother did not love me, or thought it beneath her dignity to make any display of sensibility; but at all events her reserve had raised a wall of ice between herself and me. As for my brother he was too much engrossed in pleasure to think of a mere child. So I lived quite alone, too proud to accept the love and friendship of my inferiors—abandoned to the dangerous inspirations of solitude, and with no other consolation than my books—books which had been chosen for me by my mother's confessor, and which were calculated to fill my imagination with visionary and romantic fancies. The only conversation I heard dealt with the means of leaving all the family fortune to my brother, so that he might uphold the splendour of the name, and with the necessity of marrying me to some superannuated nobleman who would take me without a dowry, or of compelling me to enter one of those aristocratic convents, which are the refuge, and often the prison, of poor girls of noble birth.

"I do not pretend to justify my fault, I am only explaining it. I thought myself the most unfortunate being in the world—and such I really was, since I honestly believed it—when I happened to meet Arthur Gordon, your father. I saw him for the first time at a *fête* given at the house of the Comte de Commarin. How he, a mere adventurer, had succeeded in forcing his way into the most exclusive society in the world, is a point which I have never been able to explain. But, alas! it is only too true that when our glances met for the first time, my heart was stirred to its inmost depths; I felt that it was no longer mine—that I was no longer free! Ah! why does not God allow a man's face to reflect at least something of his nature? This man, who was a corrupt and audacious hypocrite, had that air of apparent nobility and frankness which inspires you with unlimited confidence, and the melancholy expression on his features seemed to indicate that he had known sorrow, and had good cause to rail at destiny. In his whole appearance there was certainly a mysterious and fatal charm. I afterwards learned that this was only a natural result of the wild life he had led. He was only twenty-six, and he had already been the commander of a slave ship, and had fought in Mexico at the head of one of those guèrilla bands which make politics an excuse for pillage and murder. He divined only too well the impression he had made upon my heart. I met him twice afterwards in society. He did not speak to me; he even pretended to avoid me, but standing a little on one side, he watched my every movement with burning eyes in which I fancied I could read a passion as absorbing as my own. At last he ventured to write to me. The moment a letter addressed to me in an unknown hand was covertly handed me by my maid, I divined that it came from him. I was frightened, and my first impulse was to take it, not to my mother—whom I regarded as my natural

enemy—but to my father. However, he chanced to be absent ; I kept the letter, I read it, I answered it—and he wrote again.

"Alas ! from that moment my conduct was inexcusable. I knew that it was worse than a fault to continue this clandestine correspondence. I knew my parents would never give my hand in marriage to a man who was not of noble birth. I knew that I was risking my reputation, the spotless honour of our house, my happiness, and life ! Still I persisted—I was possessed with a strange madness that made me ready to brave every danger. Besides, he gave me no time to breathe, or reflect. Everywhere, constantly, every instant, he compelled me to think of him. By some miracle of address and audacity, he had discovered a means of intruding upon my presence, even in my father's house. For instance, every morning I found the vases in my room full of choice flowers, though I was never able to discover what hands had placed them there. Ah ! how can one help believing in an omni-present passion which one inhales with the very air one breathes ! How can one resist it ?

"I only discovered Arthur Gordon's object when it was too late. He had come to Paris with the fixed determination of trapping some rich heiress, and forcing her family to give her to him with a large dowry, after one of those disgraceful scandals which render a marriage inevitable. At the very same time he was pursuing two other rich young girls, persuaded that one of the three would certainly become his victim.

"I was the first to yield. One of those unforeseen events which are the work of Providence, was destined to decide my fate. Several times, already, in compliance with Arthur's urgent entreaties, I had met him at night time in a little pavilion in our garden. This pavilion contained a billiard-room and a spacious gallery in which my brother practised fencing and pistol shooting with his masters and friends. There, thanks to the liberty I enjoyed, we thought ourselves perfectly secure from observation, and we were imprudent enough to light the candles. One night when I had just joined Arthur in the pavilion, I thought I heard the sound of hoarse heavy breathing behind me. I turned round in a fright and saw my brother standing on the threshold. Oh ! then I realised how guilty I had been ! I felt that one or the other of these two men—my lover or my brother—would not leave that room alive.

"I tried to speak, to throw myself between them, but I found I could neither speak nor move ; it was as if I had been turned to stone. Nor did they exchange a word at first. But at last my brother drew two swords from their scabbards, and throwing one at Arthur's feet, exclaimed : 'I have no wish to assassinate you. Defend yourself, and save your life if you can !' And as Arthur hesitated, and seemed to be trying to gain time instead of picking up the weapon that was lying on the floor near him, my brother struck him in the face with the flat side of his sword, and cried : 'Now will you fight, you coward !' In an instant it was all over. Arthur caught up the sword, and springing upon my brother, disarmed him, and wounded him in the breast. I saw this. I saw the blood spurt out upon my lover's hands. I saw my brother stagger, beat the air wildly with his hands, and fall apparently lifeless to the floor. Then I, too, lost consciousness and fell !"

Any one who had seen Madame d'Argelès as she stood there recoiling in horror, with her features contracted, and her eyes dilated, would have realised that by strength of will she had dispelled the mists enshrouding the past, and distinctly beheld the scene she was describing. She seemed

to experience anew the same agony of terror she had felt twenty years before; and this lent such poignant intensity to the interest of her narrative that if M. Wilkie's heart was not exactly touched, he was, as he afterwards confessed, at least rather interested. But Madame d'Argelès seemed to have forgotten his existence. She wiped away the foam-flecked blood which had risen to her lips, and in the same mournful voice resumed her story.

"When I regained my senses it was morning, and I was lying, still dressed, on a bed in a strange room. Arthur Gordon was standing at the foot of the bed anxiously watching my movements. He did not give me time to question him. 'You are in my house,' said he. 'Your brother is dead!' Almighty God! I thought I should die as well. I hoped so. I prayed for death. But, in spite of my sobs, he pitilessly continued: 'It is a terrible misfortune which I shall never cease to regret. And yet, it was his own fault. You, who witnessed the scene, know that it was so. You can still see on my face the mark of the blow he dealt me. I only defended myself and you.' I was ignorant then of the accepted code of duelling. I I did not know that by throwing himself upon my brother before he was on guard, Arthur Gordon had virtually assassinated him. He relied upon my ignorance for the success of the sinister farce he was playing. 'When I saw your brother fall,' he continued, 'I was wild with terror; and not knowing what I did, I caught you up in my arms and brought you here. But don't tremble, I know that you are not in my house of your own free will. A carriage is below and awaits your orders to convey you to your parents' home. It will be easy to find an explanation for last night's catastrophe. Slander will not venture to attack such a family as yours.' He spoke in the constrained tone, and with that air which a brave man, condemned to death, would assume in giving utterance to his last wishes. I felt as if I were going mad. 'And you!' I exclaimed, 'you! What will become of you?' He shook his head, and with a look of anguish, replied: 'Me! What does it matter about me! I am ruined undoubtedly. So much the better. Nothing matters now that I must live apart from you!' Ah! he knew my heart. He knew his power! Swayed by an emotion which was madness rather than heroism, I sprang towards him, and clasped him in my arms: 'Then I, too, am lost!' I cried. 'Since fate united us, nothing but death shall separate us. I love you. I am your accomplice. Let the curse fall upon both!'

"A keen observer would certainly have detected a gleam of fiendish joy in his eyes. But he protested, or pretended to protest. With feigned energy he refused to accept such a sacrifice. He could not link my destiny to his, for misery had ever been his lot; and now that this last and most terrible misfortune had overtaken him, he was more than ever convinced that there was a curse hanging over him! He would not suffer me to bring misery upon myself, and eternal remorse upon him. But the more he repulsed me, the more obstinately I clung to him. The more forcibly he showed the horror of the sacrifice, the more I was convinced that my honour compelled me to make it. So at last he yielded, or seemed to yield, with transports of gratitude and love. 'Well! yes, I accept your sacrifice, my darling!' he exclaimed. 'I accept it; and before the God who is looking down upon us, I swear that I will do all that is in human power to repay such sublime and marvellous devotion.' And, bending over me, he printed a kiss upon my forehead. 'But we must fly!' he resumed, quickly. 'I have my happiness to defend now! I will not suffer any one to discover

us and separate us now. We must start at once, without losing a moment, and gain my native land, America. There, we shall be safe. For rest assured they will search for us. Who knows but even now the officers of the law are upon our track? Your family is all-powerful—I am a mere nobody—we should be crushed if they discovered us. They would bury you in a gloomy cloister, and I should be tried as a common thief, or as a vile assassin.' My only answer was: 'Let us go! Let us go at once!'

"It had been easy for him to foresee what the result of this interview would be. A vehicle was indeed waiting at the door, but not for the purpose of conveying me to the Hôtel de Chalusse—as was proved conclusively by the fact that his trunks were already strapped upon it. Besides, the coachman must have received his instructions in advance, for he drove us straight to the Hâvre Railway station without a word. It was not until some months afterwards that these trifles, which entirely escaped my notice at the time, opened my eyes to the truth. When we reached the station we found a train ready to start, and we took our places in it. I tried to quiet my conscience with miserable sophistries. Remembering that God has said to woman: To follow thy husband thou shalt abandon all else, native land, paternal home, parents and friends, I told myself that this was the husband whom my heart had instinctively chosen, and that it was my duty to follow him and share his destiny. And thus I fled with him, although I thought I left a corpse behind me—the corpse of my only brother."

M. Wilkie was actually so much interested that he forgot his anxiety concerning his attitude, and no longer thought of M. de Coralth and the Marquis de Valorsay. He even sprang up, and exclaimed: "Amazing!"

But Madame d'Argelès had already resumed: "Such was my great, inexcusable, irreparable fault. I have told you the whole truth, without trying either to conceal or justify anything. Listen to my chastisement! On our arrival at Le Hâvre the next day, Arthur confessed that he was greatly embarrassed financially. Owing to our precipitate flight, he had not had time to realize the property he possessed—at least so he told me—a banker, on whom he had depended, had moreover failed him, and he had not sufficient money to pay our passage to New York. This amazed me. My education had been absurd, like that of most young girls in my station. I knew nothing of real life, of its requirements and difficulties. I knew, of course, that there were rich people and poor people, that money was a necessity, and that those who did not possess it would stoop to any meanness to obtain it. But all this was not very clear in my mind, and I never suspected that a few francs more or less would be a matter of vital importance. So I was not in the least prepared for the request to which this confession served as preface, and Arthur Gordon was obliged to ask me point blank if I did not happen to have some money about me, or some jewellery which could be converted into money. I gave him all I had, my purse containing a few louis, a ring and a necklace, with a handsome diamond cross attached to it. However, the total value was comparatively small, and such was Arthur's disappointment that he made a remark which frightened me even then, though I did not fully understand its shameful meaning until afterwards: 'A woman who repairs to a *rendezvous* should always have all the valuables she possesses about her. One never knows what may happen.'

"Want of money was keeping us prisoners at Le Hâvre, when Arthur Gordon chanced to meet an old acquaintance, who was the captain of an American sailing vessel. He confided his embarrassment to his friend, and

the latter, whose vessel was to sail at the end of the same week, kindly offered us a free passage. The voyage was one long torture to me, for it was then that I first served my apprenticeship in shame and disgrace. By the captain's offensive gallantry, the lower officers' familiarity of manner, and the sailors' ironical glances whenever I appeared on deck, I saw that my position was a secret for no one. Everybody knew that I was the mistress and not the wife of the man whom I called my husband; and, without being really conscious of it, perhaps, they made me cruelly expiate my fault. Moreover, reason had regained its ascendency, my eyes were gradually opening to the truth, and I was beginning to learn the real character of the scoundrel for whom I had sacrificed all that makes life desirable.

"Not that he had wholly ceased to practise dissimulation. But after the evening meal he often lingered at table smoking and drinking with his friend the captain, and when he joined me afterwards, heated with alcohol, he shocked me by advocating theories which were both novel and repulsive to me. Once, after drinking more than usual, he entirely forgot his assumed part, and revealed himself in his true character. He declared he bitterly regretted that our love affair had ended so disastrously. It was deplorable to think that so happily conceived and so skilfully conducted a scheme should have terminated in bloodshed. And the blow had fallen just as he fancied he had reached the goal; just as he thought he would reap the reward of his labour. In a few weeks' more time he would undoubtedly have gained sufficient influence over me to persuade me to elope with him. This would, of course, have caused a great scandal; the next day there would have been a family conclave; a compromise would have been effected, and finally, a marriage arranged with a large dowry, to hush up the affair. 'And I should now be a rich man,' he added, 'a very rich man—I should be rolling through the streets of Paris in my carriage, instead of being on board this cursed ship, eating salt cod twice a day, and living on charity.'

"Ah! it was no longer possible to doubt. The truth was as clear as daylight. I had never been loved, not even an hour, not even a moment. The loving letters which had blinded me, the protestations of affection which had deceived me, had been addressed to my father's millions, not to myself. And not unfrequently I saw Arthur Gordon's face darken, as he talked with evident anxiety about what he could do to earn a living for himself and me in America. 'I have had trouble enough to get on alone,' he grumbled. 'What will it be now? To burden myself with a penniless wife! What egregious folly! And yet I couldn't have acted differently—I was compelled to do it.' Why had he been compelled to do it? why had he not acted differently?—that was what I vainly puzzled my brain to explain. However, his gloomy fears of poverty were not realized. A delightful surprise awaited him at New York. A relative had recently died, leaving him a legacy of fifty thousand dollars—a small fortune. I hoped that he would now cease his constant complaints, but he seemed even more displeased than before 'Such is the irony of fate,' he repeated again, and again. 'With this money, I might easily have married a wife worth a hundred thousand dollars, and then I should be rich at last!' After that, I had good reason to expect that I should soon be forsaken—but no, shortly after our arrival, he married me. Had he done so out of respect for his word? I believed so. But, alas! this marriage was the result of calculation, like everything else he did.

"We were living in New York, when one evening he came home, looking very pale and agitated. He had a French newspaper in his hand. 'Read this,' he said, handing it to me. I took the paper as he bade me, and read that my brother had not been killed, that he was improving, and that his recovery was now certain. And as I fell on my knees, bursting into tears, and thanking God for freeing me from such terrible remorse, he exclaimed: 'We are in a nice fix! I advise you to congratulate yourself!' From that time forward, I noticed he displayed the feverish anxiety of a man who feels that he is constantly threatened with some great danger. A few days afterwards, he said to me: 'I cannot endure this! Have our trunks ready to-morrow, and we will start South. Instead of calling ourselves Gordon, we'll travel under the name of Grant.' I did not venture to question him. He had quite mastered me by his cruel tyranny, and I was accustomed to obey him like a slave in terror of the lash. However, during our long journey, I learned the cause of our flight and change of name.

'Your brother, d—n him,' he said, one day, 'is hunting for me everywhere! He wants to kill me or to deliver me up to justice, I don't know which. He pretends that I tried to murder him!' It was strange; but Arthur Gordon, who was bravery personified, and who exposed himself again and again to the most frightful dangers, felt a wild, unreasoning, inconceivable fear of my brother. It was this dread that had decided him to burden himself with me. He feared that if he left me, lying unconscious beside my brother's lifeless form, I might on recovering my senses reveal the truth, and unconsciously act as his accuser. You were born in Richmond, Wilkie, where we remained nearly a month, during which time I saw but little of your father. He had formed the acquaintance of several rich planters, and spent his time hunting and gambling with them. Unfortunately, fifty thousand dollars could not last long at this rate; and, in spite of his skill as a gambler, he returned home one morning ruined. A fortnight later when he had sold our effects, and borrowed all the money he could, we embarked again for France. It was not until we reached Paris that I discovered the reasons that had influenced him in returning to Europe. He had heard of my father and mother's death, and intended to compel me to claim my share of the property. He dared not appear in person on account of my brother. At last the hour of my vengeance had arrived; for I had taken a solemn oath that this scoundrel who had ruined me should never enjoy the fortune which had been his only object in seducing me. I had sworn to die inch by inch and by the most frightful tortures rather than give him one penny of the Chalusse millions. And I kept my word.

"When I told him that I was resolved not to assert my rights, he seemed utterly confounded. He could not understand how the down trodden slave dared to revolt against him. And when he found that my decision was irrevocable, I thought he would have an attack of apoplexy. It made him wild with rage to think that he was only separated from this immense fortune—the dream of his life—by a single word of mine, and to find that he had not the power to extort that word from me. Then began a struggle between us, which became more and more frightful as the money he possessed gradually dwindled away. But it was in vain that he resorted to brutal treatment; in vain that he struck me, tortured me, and dragged me about the floor by the hair of my head! The thought that I was avenged, that his sufferings equalled mine, increased my courage a hundredfold, and made me almost insensible to physical pain. He would certainly have been the first

to grow weary of the struggle, if a fiendish plan had not occurred to him. He said to himself that if he could not conquer the wife, he *could* conquer the mother, and he threatened to turn his brutality to you, Wilkie. To save you—for I knew what he was capable of—I pretended to waver, and I asked twenty-four hours for reflection. He granted them. But the next day I left him forever, flying from him with you in my arms."

M. Wilkie turned white, and a cold chill crept up his spine. However, it was not pity for his mother's sufferings, nor shame for his father's infamy that agitated him, but ever the same terrible fear of incurring the enmity of this dangerous coveter of the Chalusse millions. Would he be able to hold his father at bay even with the assistance of M. de Coralth and the Marquis de Valorsay? A thousand questions rose to his lips, for he was eager to hear the particulars of his mother's flight; but Madame d'Argelès hurried on with her story as if she feared her strength would fail before she reached the end.

"I was alone with you, Wilkie, in this great city," she resumed. "A hundred francs was all that I possessed. My first care was to find a place of shelter. For sixteen francs a month, which I was compelled to pay in advance, I found a small, meagrely furnished room in the Faubourg Saint Martin. It was badly ventilated and miserably lighted, but still it was shelter. I said to myself that we could live there together by my work, Wilkie. I was a proficient in feminine accomplishments; I was an excellent musician, and I thought I should have no difficulty in earning the four or five francs a day which I considered absolutely necessary for our subsistence. Alas! I discovered only too soon what chimerical hopes I had cherished. To give music lessons it is necessary to obtain pupils. Where should I find them? I had no one to recommend me, and I scarcely dared show myself in the streets, so great was my fear that your father would discover our hiding-place. At last, I decided to try to find some employment in needle-work, and timidly offered my services at several shops. Alas! it is only those who have gone about from door to door soliciting work who know the misery of the thing. To ask alms would be scarcely more humiliating. People sneered at me, and replied (when they deigned to reply at all) that 'there was no business doing, and they had all the help they wanted.' My evident inexperience was probably the cause of many of these refusals, as well as my attire, for I still had the appearance of being a rich woman. Who knows what they took me for? Still the thought of you sustained me, Wilkie, and nothing daunted me.

"I finally succeeded in obtaining some bands of muslin to embroider, and some pieces of tapestry work to fill in. Unremunerative employment, no doubt, especially to one ignorant of the art of working quickly, rather than well. By rising with daylight, and working until late at night, I scarcely succeeded in earning twenty sous a day. And it was not long before even this scanty resource failed me. Winter came, and the cold weather with it. One morning I changed my last five-franc piece—it lasted us a week. Then I pawned and sold everything that was not absolutely indispensable until nothing was left me but my patched dress and a single skirt. And soon an evening came when the owner of our miserable den turned us into the street because I could no longer pay the rent.

"This was the final blow! I tottered away, clinging to the walls for support; too weak from lack of food to carry you. The rain was falling, and chilled us to the bones. You were crying bitterly. And all that night and all the next day, aimless and hopeless, we wandered about the streets.

I must either die of want or return to your father. I preferred death. Towards evening—instinct having led me to the Seine—I sat down on one of the stone benches of the Point-Neuf, holding you on my knees and watching the flow of the dark river below. There was a strange fascination—a promise of peace in its depths—that impelled me almost irresistibly to plunge into the flood. If I had been alone in the world, I should not have stopped to consider a second, but on your account, Wilkie, I hesitated."

Moved by the thought of the danger he had escaped, M. Wilkie shuddered. "*B-r-r-r!*" he growled. "You did well to hesitate."

She did not even hear him, but continued: "I at last decided that it was best to put an end to this misery, and rising with difficulty, I was approaching the parapet, when a gruff voice beside us exclaimed: 'What are you doing there?' I turned, thinking some police officer had spoken, but I was mistaken. By the light of the street lamp, I perceived a man who looked some thirty years of age, and had a frank and rather genial face. Why this stranger instantly inspired me with unlimited confidence I don't know. Perhaps it was an unconscious horror of death that made me long for any token of human sympathy. However it may have been, I told him my story, but not without changing the names, and omitting many particulars. He had taken a seat beside me on the bench, and I saw big tears roll down his cheeks as I proceeded with my narrative. 'It is ever so! it is ever so!' he muttered. 'To love is to incur the risk of martyrdom. It is to offer one's self as a victim to every perfidy, to the basest treason and ingratitude.' The man who spoke in this fashion was Baron Trigault. He did not allow me to finish my story. 'Enough!' he suddenly exclaimed, 'follow me!' A cab was passing, he made us get in, and an hour later we were in a comfortable room, beside a blazing fire, with a generously spread table before us. The next day, moreover, we were installed in a pleasant home. Alas! why wasn't the baron generous to the last? You were saved, Wilkie, but at what a price!"

She paused for a moment, her face redder than fire; but soon mastering her agitation, she resumed: "There was one great cause of dissension between the baron and myself. I wished you to be educated, Wilkie, like the son of a noble family, while he desired you should receive the practical training suited to a youth who would have to make his own way in the world, and win position, fortune, and even name for himself. Ah! he was a thousand times right, as events have since proved only too well! But maternal love blinded me, and, after an angry discussion, he went away, declaring he would not see me again until I became more reasonable. He thought that reflection would cure me of my folly. Unfortunately, he was not acquainted with the fatal obstinacy which is the distinguishing characteristic of the Chalusse family. While I was wondering how I could find the means of carrying the plans I had formed for you into execution, two of the baron's acquaintances presented themselves, with the following proposal: Aware of the enormous profits derived by clandestine gambling dens, they had conceived the project of opening a public establishment on a large scale, where any Parisian or foreigner, if he seemed to be a gentleman, and possessed of means, would find no difficulty in obtaining admission. By taking certain precautions, and by establishing this gambling den in a private drawing-room, they believed the scheme practicable, and came to suggest that I should keep the drawing-room in question, and be their partner in the enterprise. Scarcely knowing what I pledged myself to, I accepted their offer, influenced—I should rather say decided—by the

exalted positions which both these gentlemen occupied, by the public consideration they enjoyed, and the honoured names they bore. And that same week this house was rented and furnished, and I was installed in it under the name of Lia d'Argelès.

"But this was not all. There still remained the task of creating for myself one of those scandalous reputations that attract public attention. This proved an easy task, thanks to the assistance of my silent partners, and the innocent simplicity of several of their friends and certain journalists. As for myself, I did my best to insure the success of the horrible farce which was to lend infamous notoriety to the name of Lia d'Argelès. I had magnificent equipages and superb dresses, and I made myself conspicuous at the theatres and all places of public resort. As is generally the case when one is acting contrary to conscience, I called the most absurd sophistries to my assistance. I tried to convince myself that appearances are nothing, that reality is everything, and that it did not matter if I were known as a courtesan since rumour lied, and my life *was* really chaste. When the baron hastened to me and tried to rescue me from the abyss into which I had flung myself, it was too late. I had discovered that the business would prove successful; and for your sake, I longed for money as passionately, as madly, as any miser. Last year my gaming-room yielded more than one hundred and fifty thousand francs clear profit, and I received as my share the thirty-five thousand francs which you squandered. Now you know me as I really am. My associates, my partners, the men whose secret I have faithfully kept, walk the streets with their heads erect. They boast of their unsullied honour, and they are respected by every one. Such is the truth, and I have no reason to make their disgrace known. Besides, if I proclaimed it from the house-tops, no one would believe me. But you are my son, and I owe you the truth, the whole truth!"

In any age but the present, Madame d'Argelès' story would have seemed absolutely incredible. Now-a-days, however, such episodes are by no means rare. Two men—two men of exalted rank and highly respected, to use a common expression—associate in opening a gaming-house under the very eyes of the police, and in coining money out of a woman's supposed disgrace. 'Tis after all but an every day occurrence.

The unhappy woman had told her story with apparent coldness, and yet, in her secret heart, she perhaps hoped that by disclosing her terrible sacrifice and long martyrdom, she would draw a burst of gratitude and tenderness from her son, calculated to repay her for all her sufferings. But the hope was vain. It would have been easier to draw water from a solid rock than to extract a sympathetic tear from Wilkie's eyes. He was only alive to the practical side of this narrative, and what impressed him most was the impudent assurance of Madame d'Argelès' business associates. "Not a bad idea; not bad at all," he exclaimed. And, boiling over with curiosity, he continued: "I would give something handsome to know those men's names. Really you ought to tell me. It would be worth one's while to know."

Any other person than this interesting young man would have been crushed by the look his mother gave him—a look embodying the deepest disappointment and contempt. "I think you must be mad," she remarked coldly. And as he sprang up, astonished that any one should doubt his abundant supply of good sense, "Let us put an end to this," she sternly added.

Thereupon she hastily went into the adjoining room, reappearing a

moment later with a roll of papers in her hand. "Here," she remarked, "is my marriage certificate, your certificate of birth, and a copy of my renunciation—a perfectly valid document, since the court has authorised it, owing to my husband's absence. All these proofs I am ready and willing to place at your disposal, but on one condition."

This last word fell like a cold shower-bath upon Wilkie's exultant joy. "What is this condition?" he anxiously inquired.

"It is that you should sign this deed, which has been drawn up by my notary—a deed by which you pledge yourself to hand me the sum of two million francs on the day you come into possession of the Chalusse property."

Two millions! The immensity of the sum struck Wilkie dumb with consternation. Nor did he forget that he would be compelled to give the Viscount de Coralth the large reward he had promised him—a reward promised in writing, unfortunately. "I shall have nothing left," he began, piteously.

But with a disdainful gesture Madame d'Argelès interrupted him. "Set your mind at rest," said she. "You will still be immensely rich. All the estimates which have been made are far below the mark. When I was a girl I often heard my father say that his income amounted to more than eight hundred thousand francs a year. My brother inherited the whole property, and I would be willing to swear that he never spent more than half of his income."

Wilkie's nerves had never been subjected to so severe a shock. He tottered and his brain whirled. "Oh! oh!" he stammered. This was all he could say.

"Only I must warn you of a more than probable deception," pursued Madame d'Argelès. "As my brother was firmly resolved to deprive me even of my rightful portion of the estate, he concealed his fortune in every possible way. It will undoubtedly require considerable time and trouble to gain possession of the whole. However I know a man, formerly the Count de Chalusse's confidential agent, who might aid you in this task."

"And this man's name?"

"Is Isidore Fortunat. I saved his card for you. Here it is."

M. Wilkie took it up, placed it carefully in his pocket, and then exclaimed: "That being the case, I consent to sign, but after this you need not complain. Two millions at five per cent. ought to greatly alleviate one's sufferings."

Madame d'Argelès did not deign to notice this delicate irony. "I will tell you in advance to what purpose I intend to apply this sum," she said.

"Ah!"

"I intend one of these two millions to serve as the dowry of a young girl who would have been the Count de Chalusse's sole legatee, if his death had not been so sudden and so unexpected."

"And the other one?"

"The other I intend to invest for you in such a way that you can only touch the interest of it, so that you will not want for bread after you have squandered your inheritance, even to the very last penny."

This wise precaution could not fail to shock such a brilliant young man as M. Wilkie. "Do you take me for a fool?" he exclaimed. "I may appear very generous, but I am shrewd enough, never you fear."

"Sign," interrupted Madame d'Argelès, coldly.

But he attempted to prove that he was no fool by reading and re-reading the contract before he would consent to append his name to it. At last,

however, he did so, and stowed away the proofs which insured him the much-coveted property.

"Now," said Madame d'Argelès, "I have one request to make of you. Whenever your father makes his appearance and lays claim to this fortune, I entreat you to avoid a law-suit, which would only make your mother's shame and the disgrace attached to the hitherto stainless name of Chalusse still more widely known. Compromise with him. You will be rich enough to satisfy his greed without feeling it."

M. Wilkie remained silent for a moment, as if he were deliberating upon the course he ought to pursue. "If my father is reasonable, I will be the same," he said at last. "I will choose as an arbiter between us one of my friends—a man who acts on the square, like myself—the Marquis de Valorsay."

"My God! do you know him?"

"He is one of my most intimate friends."

Madame d'Argelès had become very pale. "Wretched boy!" she exclaimed. "You don't know that it's the marquis—" She paused abruptly. One word more and she would have betrayed Pascal Ferailleur's secret plans, with which she had been made acquainted by Baron Trigault. Had she a right to do this, even to put her son on his guard against a man whom she considered the greatest villain in the world?

"Well?" insisted M. Wilkie, in surprise.

But Madame d'Argelès had recovered her self-possession. "I only wished to warn you against too close a connection with the Marquis de Valorsay. He has an excellent position in society, but yours will be far more brilliant. His star is on the wane; yours is just rising. All that he is regretting, you have a right to hope for. Perhaps even now he is jealous of you, and wishes to persuade you to take some false step."

"Ah! you little know him!"

"I have warned you."

M. Wilkie took up his hat, but, though he was longing to depart, embarrassment kept him to the spot. He vaguely felt that he ought not to leave his mother in this style. "I hope I shall soon have some good news to bring you," he began.

"Before night I shall have left this house," she answered.

"Of course. But you are going to give me your new address."

"No."

"What?—No!"

She shook her head sadly, and in a scarcely audible voice responded: "It is not likely that we shall meet again."

"And the two millions that I am to turn over to you?"

"Mr. Patterson will collect the money. As for me, say to yourself that I'm dead. You have broken the only link that bound me to life, by proving the futility of the most terrible sacrifices. However I am a mother, and I forgive you." Then as he did not move, and as she felt that her strength was deserting her, she dragged herself from the room, murmuring, "Farewell!"

XVI.

STUPEFIED with astonishment, M. Wilkie stood for a moment silent and motionless. "Allow me," he faltered at last; "allow me—I wish to explain." But Madame d'Argelès did not even turn her head; the door closed behind her and he was left alone.

However strong a man's nature may be, he always has certain moments of weakness. For instance, at the present moment Wilkie was completely at a loss what to do. Not that he repented, he was incapable of that; but there are hours when the most hardened conscience is touched, and when long-dormant instincts at last assert their rights. If he had obeyed his first impulse, he would have darted after his mother and thrown himself on his knees before her. But reflection, remembrance of the Viscount de Coralth, and the Marquis de Valorsay, made him silent the noblest voice that had spoken in his soul for many a long day. So, with his head proudly erect, he went off, twirling his moustaches and followed by the whispers of the servants—whispers which were ready to change into hisses at any moment.

But what did he care for the opinion of these plebeians! Before he was a hundred paces from the house his emotion had vanished, and he was thinking how he could most agreeably spend the time until the hour appointed for his second interview with M. de Valorsay. He had not breakfasted, but "his stomach was out of sorts," as he said to himself, and it would really have been impossible for him to swallow a morsel. Thus not caring to return home, he started in quest of one of his former intimates, with the generous intention of overpowering him with the great news. Unfortunately he failed to find this friend, and eager to vent the pride that was suffocating him, in some way or other, he entered the shop of an engraver, whom he crushed by his importance, and ordered some visiting cards bearing the inscription W. de Gordon-Chalusse, with a count's coronet in one of the corners.

Thus occupied, time flew by so quickly that he was a trifle late in keeping his appointment with his dear friend the marquis. Wilkie found M. de Valorsay as he had left him—in his smoking-room, talking with the Viscount de Coralth. Not that the marquis had been idle, but it had barely taken him an hour to set in motion the machinery which he had had in complete readiness since the evening before. "Victory!" cried Wilkie, as he appeared on the threshold. "It was a hard battle, but I asserted my rights. I am the acknowledged heir! the millions are mine!" And without giving his friends time to congratulate him, he began to describe his interview with Madame d'Argelès, presenting his conduct in the most odious light possible, pretending he had indulged in all sorts of harsh rejoinders, and making himself out to be "a man of bronze," or "a block of marble," as he said.

"You are certainly more courageous than I fancied," said M. de Valorsay gravely, when the narrative was ended.

"Is that really so?"

"It is, indeed. Now the world is before you. Let your story be noised abroad—and it will be noised abroad—and you will become a hero. Imagine the amazement of Paris when it learns that Lia d'Argelès was a virtuous woman, who sacrificed her reputation for the sake of her son—a martyr, whose disgrace was only a shameful falsehood invented by two men of rank to increase the attractions of their gambling-den! It will take the newspapers a month to digest this strange romance. And whom will all this notoriety fall upon? Upon you, my dear sir; and as your millions will lend an additional charm to the romance, you will become the lion of the season."

M. Wilkie was really too much overwhelmed to feel elated. "Upon my word, you overpower me, my dear marquis—you quite overpower me," he stammered.

"I too have been at work," resumed the marquis. "And I have made numerous inquiries, in accordance with my promise. I almost regret it, for what I have discovered is—very singular, to say the least. I was just saying so to Coralth when you came in. What I have learned makes it extremely unpleasant for me, to find myself mixed up in the affair; accordingly, I have requested the persons who gave me this information to call here. You shall hear their story, and then you must decide for yourself." So saying, he rang the bell, and as soon as a servant answered the summons, he exclaimed: "Show M. Casimir in."

When the lackey had retired to carry out this order, the marquis remarked: "Casimir was the deceased count's valet. He is a clever fellow, honest, intelligent, and well up in his business—such a man as you will need, in fact, and I won't try to conceal the fact that the hope of entering your service has aided considerably in unloosening his tongue."

M. Casimir, who was irreproachably clad in black, with a white cambric tie round his neck, entered the room at this very moment, smiling and bowing obsequiously. "This gentleman, my good fellow," said M. de Valorsay, pointing to Wilkie, "is your former master's only heir. A proof of devotion might induce him to keep you with him. What you told me a little while ago is of great importance to him; see if you can repeat it now for his benefit."

In his anxiety to secure a good situation, M. Casimir had ventured to apply to the Marquis de Valorsay; he had talked a good deal, and the marquis had conceived the plan of making him an unsuspecting accomplice. "I never deny my words," replied the valet, "and since monsieur is the heir to the property, I won't hesitate to tell him that immense sums have been stolen from the late count's estate."

M. Wilkie bounded from his chair. "Immense sums!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible!"

"Monsieur shall judge. On the morning preceding his death, the count had more than two millions in bank-notes and bonds stowed away in his escritoire, but when the justice of the peace came to take the inventory, the money could not be found. We servants were terribly alarmed, for we feared that suspicion would fall upon us."

Ah! if Wilkie had only been alone he would have given vent to his true feelings. But here, under the eyes of the marquis and M. de Coralth, he felt that he must maintain an air of stoical indifference. He *almost* succeeded in doing so, and in a tolerably firm voice he remarked: "This is not very pleasant news. Two millions! that's a good haul. Tell me, my friend, have you any clue to the thief?"

The valet's troubled glance betrayed an uneasy conscience, but he had gone too far to draw back. "I shouldn't like to accuse an innocent person," he replied, "but there was some one who constantly had access to that escritoire."

"And who was that?"

"Mademoiselle Marguerite."

"I don't know the lady."

"She's a young girl who is—at least people say—the count's illegitimate daughter. Her word was law in the house."

"What has become of her?"

"She has gone to live with General de Fondège, one of the count's friends. She wouldn't take her jewels and diamonds away with her, which seemed very strange, for they are worth more than a hundred thousand

francs. Even Bourigeau said to me: 'That's unnatural M. Casimir.' Bourigeau is the concierge of the house, a very worthy man. Monsieur will not find his equal."

Unfortunately, this tribute to the merits of the valet's friend was interrupted by the arrival of a footman, who, after tapping respectfully at the door, entered the room and exclaimed: "The doctor is here, and desires to speak with Monsieur le Marquis."

"Very well," replied M. de Valorsay, "ask him to wait. When I ring, you can usher him in." Then addressing M. Casimir, he added:

"You may retire for the present, but don't leave the house. M. Wilkie will acquaint you with his intentions by-and-by."

The valet thereupon backed out of the room, bowing profoundly.

"There is a story for you!" exclaimed M. Wilkie as soon as the door was closed. "A robbery of two millions!"

The marquis shook his head, and remarked, gravely: "That's a mere nothing. I suspect something far more terrible."

"What, pray? Upon my word! you frighten me."

"Wait! I may be mistaken. Even the doctor may be deceived. But you shall judge for yourself." As he spoke, he pulled the bell-rope, and an instant after, the servant announced: "Dr. Jodon."

It was, indeed, the same physician who had annoyed Mademoiselle Marguerite by his persistent curiosity and impertinent questions, at the Count de Chalusse's bed-side; the same crafty and ambitious man, constantly tormented by covetousness, and ready to do anything to gratify it —the man of the period, in short, who sacrificed everything to the display by which he hoped to deceive other people, and who was almost starving in the midst of his mock splendour.

M. Casimir was an innocent accomplice, but the doctor knew what he was doing. Interviewed on behalf of the Marquis de Valorsay by Madame Léon, he had fathomed the whole mystery at once. These two crafty natures had read and understood each other. No definite words had passed between them—they were both too shrewd for that; and yet, a compact had been concluded by which each had tacitly agreed to serve the other according to his need.

As soon as the physician appeared, M. de Valorsay rose and shook hands with him; then, offering him an arm-chair, he remarked: "I will not conceal from you, doctor, that I have in some measure prepared this gentleman"—designating M. Wilkie—"for your terrible revelation."

By the doctor's attitude, a keen observer might have divined the secret trepidation that always precedes a bad action which has been conceived and decided upon in cold blood.

"To tell the truth," he began, speaking slowly, and with some difficulty, "now that the moment for speaking has come, I almost hesitate. Our profession has painful exigencies. Perhaps it is now too late. If there had been any of the count s re atives in the house, or even an heir at the time, I should have insisted upon an autopsy. But now—"

On hearing the word "autopsy," M. Wilkie looked round with startled eyes. He opened his lips toi nterrupt the speaker, but the physician had already resumed his narrative. "Besides, I had only suspicions," he said, "suspicions based, it is true, upon strange and alarming circumstances. I am a man, that is to say, I am liable to error. In the kingdom of science it would be unpardonable temerity on my part to affirm—"

"To affirm what?" interrupted M. Wilkie.

The physician did not seem to hear him, but continued in the same dogmatic tone. "The count apparently died from an attack of apoplexy, but certain poisons produce similar and even identical symptoms which are apt to deceive the most experienced medical men. The persistent efforts of the count's intellect, his muscular rigidity alternating with utter relaxation, the dilation of the pupils of his eyes, and more than aught else the violence of his last convulsions, have led me to ask myself if some criminal had not hastened his end."

Whiter than his shirt, and trembling like a leaf, M. Wilkie sprang from his chair. "I understand!" he exclaimed. "The count was murdered—poisoned."

But the physician replied with an energetic protest. "Oh, not so fast!" said he. "Don't mistake my conjectures for assertions. Still, I ought not to conceal the circumstances which awakened my suspicions. On the morning preceding his attack, the count took two spoonfuls of the contents of a vial which the people in charge could not or would not produce. When I asked what this vial contained, the answer was: 'A medicine to prevent apoplexy.' I don't say that this is false, but prove it. As for the motive that led to the crime, it is apparent at once. The escritoire contained two millions of francs, and the money has disappeared. Show me the vial, find the money, and I will admit that I am wrong. But until then, I shall have my suspicions."

He did not speak like a physician but like an examining magistrate, and his alarming deductions found their way even to M. Wilkie's dull brain. "Who could have committed the crime?" he asked.

"It could only have been the person likely to profit by it; and only one person besides the count knew that the money was in the house, and had possession of the key of this escritoire."

"And this person?"

"Is the count's illegitimate daughter, who lived in the house with him—Mademoiselle Marguerite."

M. Wilkie sank into his chair again, completely overwhelmed. The coincidence between the doctor's deposition and M. Casimir's testimony was too remarkable to pass unnoticed. Further doubt seemed impossible. "Ah! this is most unfortunate!" faltered Wilkie. "What a pity! Such difficulties never assail any one but me! What am I to do?" And in his distress he glanced from the doctor to the Marquis de Valorsay, and then at M. de Coralth, as if seeking inspiration from each of them.

"My profession forbids my acting as an adviser in such cases," replied the physician, "but these gentlemen have not the same reasons for keeping silent."

"Excuse me," interrupted the marquis quickly; "but this is one of those cases in which a man must be left to his own inspirations. The most I can do, is to say what course I should pursue if I were one of the deceased count's relatives or heirs."

"Pray tell me, my dear marquis," sighed Wilkie. "You would render me an immense service by doing so."

M. de Valorsay seemed to reflect for a moment; and then he solemnly exclaimed: "I should feel that my honour required me to investigate every circumstance connected with this mysterious affair. Before receiving a man's estate, one must know the cause of his death, so as to avenge him if he has been foully murdered."

For M. Wilkie the oracle had spoken. "Such is my opinion exactly,"

he declared. "But what course would you pursue, my dear marquis? How would you set about solving this mystery?"

"I should appeal to the authorities."

"Ah!"

"And this very day, this very hour, without losing a second, I should address a communication to the public prosecutor, informing him of the robbery which is patent to any one, and referring to the possibility of foul play."

"Yes, that would be an excellent idea; but there is one slight drawback —I don't know how to draw up such a communication."

"I know no more about it than you do yourself; but any lawyer or notary will give you the necessary information. Are you acquainted with any such person? Would you like me to give you the address of my business man? He is a very clever fellow, who has almost all the members of my club as his clients."

This last reason was more than sufficient to fix M. Wilkie's choice. "Where can I find him?" he inquired.

"At his house—he is always there at this hour. Come! here is a scrap of paper and a pencil. You had better make a note of his address. Write: Mauméjan, Route de la Révolte. Tell him that I sent you, and he will treat you with the same consideration as he would show to me. He lives a long way off, but my brougham is standing in the courtyard; so take it, and when your consultation is over, come back and dine with me."

"Ah! you are too kind!" exclaimed M. Wilkie. "You overpower me, my dear marquis, you do, upon my word! I shall fly and be back in a moment."

He went off looking radiant; and a moment later the carriage which was to take him to M. Mauméjan's was heard rolling out of the courtyard.

The doctor had already taken up his hat and cane. "You will excuse me for leaving you so abruptly Monsieur le Marquis," said he, "but I have an engagement to discuss a business matter."

"Indeed!"

"I am negotiating for the purchase of a dentist's establishment."

"What, you?"

"Yes, I. You may tell me that this is a downfall, but I will answer, 'It will give me a living.' Medicine is becoming a more and more unremunerative profession. However, hard a physician my work, he can scarcely pay for the water he uses in washing his hands. I have an opportunity of purchasing the business of a well-established and well-known dentist, in an excellent neighbourhood. Why not avail myself of it? Only one thing worries me—the lack of funds."

The marquis had expected that the doctor would require remuneration for his services. Before compromising himself any further, M. Jodon wished to know what compensation he was to receive. The marquis was so sure of this, that he quickly exclaimed, "Ah, my dear doctor, if you have need of twenty thousand francs, I shall be only too happy to offer them to you."

"Really?"

"Upon my honour!"

"And when can you let me have the money?"

"In three or four days' time."

The bargain was concluded. The doctor was now ready to find traces of any poison whatsoever in the Count de Chalusse's exhumed remains. He

pressed the marquis's hand and then went off, exclaiming: "Whatever happens you can count upon me."

Left alone with the Viscount de Coralth, and consequently freed from all restraint, M. de Valorsay rose with a long-drawn sigh of relief. "What an interminable *séance!*" he growled. And, approaching his acolyte, who was sitting silent and motionless in an arm-chair, he slapped him on the shoulder, exclaiming: "Are you ill that you sit there like that, as still as a mummy?"

The viscount turned as if he had been suddenly aroused from slumber. "I'm well enough," he answered somewhat roughly. "I was only thinking."

"Your thoughts are not very pleasant, to judge from the look on your face."

"No. I was thinking of the fate that you are preparing for us."

"Oh! A truce to disagreeable prophecies, please! Besides, it's too late to draw back, or to even think of retreat. The Rubicon is passed."

"Alas! that is the cause of my anxiety. If it hadn't been for my wretched past, which you have threatened me with like a dagger, I should long ago have left you to incur this danger alone. You were useful to me in times past, I admit. You presented me to the Baroness Trigault, to whose patronage I owe my present means, but I am paying too dearly for your services in allowing myself to be made the instrument of your dangerous schemes. Who aided you in defrauding Kami-Bey? Who bet for you against your own horse Domingo? Who risked his life in slipping those cards in the pack which Pascal Ferailleur held? It was Coralth, always Coralth."

A gesture of anger escaped the marquis, but resolving to restrain himself, he made no rejoinder. It was not until after he had walked five or six times round the smoking-room and grown more calm that he returned to the viscount's side. "Really, I don't recognize you," he began. "Is it really you who have turned coward? And at what a moment, pray? Why, on the very eve of success."

"I wish I could believe you."

"Facts shall convince you. This morning I might have doubted, but now, thanks to that vain idiot who goes by the name of Wilkie, I am sure, perfectly, mathematically sure of success. Mauméjan, who is entirely devoted to me, and who is the greediest, most avaricious scoundrel alive, will draw up such a complaint that Marguerite will sleep in prison. Moreover, other witnesses will be summoned. By what Casimir has said, you can judge what the other servants will say. This testimony will be sufficient to convict her of the robbery. As for the poisoning, you heard Dr. Jodon. Can I depend upon him? Evidently, if I pay without haggling. Very well; I shall pay."

But all this did not reassure M. de Coralth. "The accusation will fall to the ground," said he, "as soon as the famous vial from which M. de Chalusse took two spoonfuls is found."

"Excuse me; it won't be found."

"But why?"

"Because I know where it is, my dear friend. It is in the count's escritoire, but it won't be there any longer on the day after to-morrow."

"Who will remove it?"

"A skilful fellow whom Madame Léon has found for me. Everything has been carefully arranged. To-morrow night at the latest Madame Léon

will let this man into the Hôtel de Chalusse by the garden gate, which she has kept the key of. Vantrasson, as the man is called, knows the management of the house, and he will break open the escritoire and take the vial away. You may say that there are seals upon the furniture, placed there by the justice of the peace. That's true, but this man tells me that he can remove and replace them in such a way as to defy detection; and as the lock has been forced once already—the day after the count's death—a second attempt to break the escritoire open will not be detected."

The viscount remarked, with an ironical air: "All that is perfect; but the autopsy will reveal the falseness of the accusation."

"Naturally—but an autopsy will require time, and that will suit my plans admirably. After eight or ten days' solitary confinement and several rigid examinations, Mademoiselle Marguerite's energy and courage will flag. What do you think she will reply to the man who says to her: 'I love you, and for your sake I will attempt the impossible. Swear to become my wife and I will establish your innocence?'"

"I think she will say: 'Save me and I will marry you!'"

M. de Valorsay clapped his hands. "Bravo!" he exclaimed; "you have spoken the truth. Remember, now, that your dark forebodings are only chimeras! Yes, she will swear it, and I know she is the woman to keep her vow, even if she died of sorrow. And the very next day I will go to the examining magistrate and say to him: 'Marguerite a thief! Ah, what a frightful mistake. A robbery has been committed, it's true; but I know the real culprit—a scoundrel who fancied that by destroying a single letter he would annihilate all traces of the breach of fidelity he had committed. Fortunately, the Count de Chalusse distrusted this man, and proof of his breach of trust is in existence. I have this proof in my hands.' And I will show a letter establishing the truth of my assertion."

No forebodings clouded the marquis's joy; he saw no obstacles; it seemed to him as if he had already triumphed. "And the day following," he resumed, "when Marguerite becomes my wife, I shall take from a certain drawer a certain document, given to me by M. de Chalusse when I was on the point of becoming his son-in-law, and in which he recognizes Marguerite as his daughter, and makes her his sole legatee. And this document is perfectly *en règle*, and unattackable. Mauméjan, who has examined it, guarantees that the value of the count's estate cannot be less than ten millions. Five will go to Madame d'Argelés, or her son Wilkie, as their share of the property. The remaining five will be mine. Come, confess that the plan is admirable!"

"Admirable, undoubtedly; but terribly complicated. When there are so many wheels within wheels, one of them is always sure to get out of order."

"Nonsense!"

"Besides, you have I don't know how many accomplices—Mauméjan, the doctor, Madame Léon, and Vantrasson, not counting myself. Will all these people perform their duties satisfactorily?"

"Each of them is as much interested in my success as I am myself."

"But we have enemies—Madame d'Argelès, Fortunat——"

"Madame d'Argelès is about to leave Paris. If Fortunat is troublesome I will purchase his silence; Mauméjan has promised me money."

But M. de Coralth had kept his strongest argument until the last. "And Pascal Ferailleur?" said he. "You have forgotten him."

No; M. de Valorsay had not forgotten him. You do not forget the

man you have ruined and dishonoured. Still, it was in a careless tone that ill-accorded with his state of mind that the marquis replied: "The poor devil must be *en route* for America by this time."

The viscount shook his head. "That's what I've in vain been trying to convince myself of," said he. "Do you know that Pascal was virtually expelled from the Palais de Justice, and that his name has been struck off the list of advocates? If he hasn't blown his brains out, it is only because he hopes to prove his innocence. Ah! if you knew him as well as I do, you wouldn't be so tranquil in mind!"

He stopped short for the door had suddenly opened. The interruption made the marquis frown, but anger gave way to anxiety when he perceived Madame Léon, who entered the room out of breath and extremely red in the face.

"There wasn't a cab to be had!" she groaned. "Just my luck. I came on foot, and ran the whole way. I'm utterly exhausted;" and so saying she sank into an arm-chair.

M. de Valorsay had turned very pale. "Defer your complaints until another time," he said, harshly. "What has happened? Tell me."

The estimable woman raised her hands to heaven, as she plaintively replied: "There is so much to tell? First, Mademoiselle Marguerite has written two letters, but I have failed to discover to whom they were sent. Secondly, she remained for more than an hour yesterday evening in the drawing-room with the General's son, Lieutenant Gustave, and, on parting, they shook hands like a couple of friends, and said, 'It is agreed.'"

"And is that all?"

"One moment and you'll see. This morning Mademoiselle went out with Madame de Fondège to call on the Baroness Trigault. I do not know what took place there, but there must have been a terrible scene; for they brought Mademoiselle Marguerite back unconscious, in one of the baron's carriages."

"Do you hear that, viscount?" exclaimed M. de Valorsay.

"Yes! You shall have the explanation to-morrow," answered M. de Coralth.

"And last, but not least," resumed Madame Léon. "On returning home this evening at about five o'clock, I fancied I saw Mademoiselle Marguerite leave the house and go up the Rue Pigalle. I had thought she was ill and in bed, and I said to myself, 'This is very strange.' So I hastened after her. It was indeed she. Of course, I followed her. And what did I see? Why, Mademoiselle paused to talk with a vagabond, clad in a blouse. They exchanged notes, and Mademoiselle Marguerite returned home. And here I am. She must certainly suspect something. What is to be done?"

If M. de Valorsay were frightened, he did not show it. "Many thanks for your zeal, my dear lady," he replied, "but all this is a mere nothing. Return home at once; you will receive my instructions to-morrow."

XVII.

MADEMOISELLE MARGUERITE had been greatly surprised on the occasion of her visit to M. Fortunat when she saw Victor Chupin suddenly step forward and eagerly exclaim: "I shall be unworthy of the name I bear if I do not find M. Ferailleur for you in less than a fortnight."

It is true that M. Fortunat's clerk did not appear to the best advantage on this occasion. In order to watch M. de Coralth, he had again arrayed himself in his cast-off clothes, and with his blouse and his worn-out shoes, his "knockers" and his glazed cap, he looked the vagabond to perfection. Still, strange as it may seem, Mademoiselle Marguerite did not once doubt the devotion of this strange auxiliary. Without an instant's hesitation she replied, "I accept your services, monsieur."

Chupin felt at least a head taller as he heard this beautiful young girl speak to him in a voice as clear and as sonorous as crystal. "Ah! you are right to trust me," he rejoined, striking his chest with his clinched hand, "for I have a heart—but—"

"But what, monsieur?"

"I am wondering if you would consent to do what I wish. It would be a very good plan, but if it displeases you, we will say no more about it."

"And what do you wish?"

"To see you every day, so as to tell you what I've done, and to obtain such directions as I may require. I'm well aware that I can't go to M. de Fondège's door and ask to speak to you; but there are other ways of seeing each other. For instance, every evening at five o'clock precisely, I might pass along the Rue Pigalle, and warn you of my presence by such a signal as this: 'Pi-ouit!'" So saying he gave vent to the peculiar call, half whistle half ejaculation, which is familiar to the Parisian working-classes. "Then," he resumed, "you might come down and I would tell you the news; besides, I might often help you by doing errands."

Mademoiselle Marguerite reflected for a moment, and then bowing her head, she replied:

"What you suggest is quite practicable. On and after to-morrow evening I will watch for you; and if I don't come down at the end of half an hour, you will know that I am unavoidably detained."

Chupin ought to have been satisfied. But no, he had still another request to make; and instinct, supplying the lack of education, told him that it was a delicate one. Indeed, he dared not present his petition; but his embarrassment was so evident, and he twisted his poor cap so despairingly, that at last the young girl gently asked him: "Is there anything more?"

He still hesitated, but eventually, mustering all his courage, he replied: "Well, yes, Mademoiselle. I've never seen Monsieur Ferailleur. Is he tall or short, light or dark, stout or thin? I do not know. I might stand face to face with him without being able to say, 'It's he.' But it would be quite a different thing if I only had a photograph of him."

A crimson flush spread over Mademoiselle Marguerite's face. Still she answered, unaffectedly, "I will give you M. Ferailleur's photograph to-morrow, monsieur."

"Then I shall be all right!" exclaimed Chupin. "Have no fears, mademoiselle, we shall outwit these scoundrels!"

So far a silent witness of this scene, M. Fortunat now felt it his duty to interfere. He was not particularly pleased by his clerk's suddenly increased importance; and yet it mattered little to him, for his only object was to revenge himself on Valorsay. "Victor is a capable and trustworthy young fellow, mademoiselle" he declared; "he has grown up under my training, and I think you will find him a faithful servant."

A "have you finished, you old liar?" rose to Chupin's lips, but respect for Mademoiselle Marguerite prevented him from uttering the words.

"Then everything is decided," she said, pleasantly. And with a smile she offered her hand to Chupin as one does in concluding a bargain.

If he had yielded to his first impulse he would have thrown himself on his knees and kissed this hand of hers, the whitest and most beautiful he had ever seen. As it was, he only ventured to touch it with his finger tips, and yet he changed colour two or three times. "What a woman!" he exclaimed, when she had left them. "A perfect queen! A man would willingly allow himself to be chopped in pieces for her sake; and she's as good and as clever as she's handsome. Did you notice, monsieur, that she did not offer to pay me. She understood that I offered to work for her for my own pleasure, for my own satisfaction and honour. Heavens! how I should have chafed if she had offered me money. How provoked I should have been!"

Chupin so fascinated that he wished no reward for his toil! This was so astonishing that M. Fortunat remained for a moment speechless with surprise. "Have you gone mad, Victor?" he inquired at last.

"Mad! I?—not at all; I'm only becoming—" He stopped short. He was going to add: "an honest man." But it is scarcely proper to talk about the rope in the hangman's house, and there are certain words which should never be pronounced in the presence of certain people. Chupin knew this, and so he quickly resumed: "When I become rich, when I'm a great banker, and have a host of clerks who spend their time in counting my gold behind a grating, I should like to have a wife of my own like that. But I must be off about my business now, so till we meet again, monsieur."

The foregoing conversation will explain how it happened that Madame Léon chanced to surprise her dear young lady in close conversation with a vagabond clad in a blouse. Victor Chupin was not a person to make promises and then leave them unfulfilled. Though he was usually unimpressionable, like all who lead a precarious existence, still, when his emotions were once aroused, they did not spend themselves in empty protestations. It became his fixed determination to find Pascal Ferailleur, and the difficulties of the task in no wise weakened his resolution. His starting point was that Pascal had lived in the Rue d'Ulm, and had suddenly gone off with his mother, with the apparent intention of sailing for America. This was all he knew positively, and everything else was mere conjecture. Still Mademoiselle Marguerite had convinced him that instead of leaving Paris, Pascal was really still there, only waiting for an opportunity to establish his innocence, and to wreak his vengeance upon M. de Coralth and the Marquis de Valorsay. On the other hand, with such a slight basis to depend upon, was it not almost madness to hope to discover a man who had such strong reasons for concealing himself? Chupin did not think so; in fact, when he declared his determination to perform this feat, his plan was already perfected.

On leaving M. Fortunat's office, he hastened straight to the Rue d'Ulm, at the top of his speed. The *concierge* of the house where Pascal had formerly resided was by no means a polite individual. He was the very same man who had answered Mademoiselle Marguerite's questions so rudely; but Chupin had a way of conciliating even the most crabbish doorkeeper, and of drawing from him such information as he desired. He learned that at nine o'clock on the sixteenth of October, Madame Ferailleur, after seeing her trunks securely strapped on to a cab, had entered the vehicle, ordering the driver to take her to the Railway Station in the Place du Hâvre! Chupin

wished to ascertain the number of the cab, but the *concierge* could not give it. He mentioned, however, that this cab had been procured by Madame Ferailleur's servant-woman, who lived only a few steps from the house. A moment later Chupin was knocking at this woman's door. She was a very worthy person, and bitterly regretted the misfortunes which had befallen her former employers. She confirmed the doorkeeper's story; but unfortunately she, too, had quite forgotten the number of the vehicle. All she could say was that she had hired it at the cab stand in the Rue Soufflot, and that the driver was a portly, pleasant-faced man.

Chupin repaired at once to the Rue Soufflot, where he found the man in charge of the stand in the most savage mood imaginable. He began by asking Chupin what right he had to question him, why he wished to do so, and if he took him for a spy. He added that his duty only consisted in noting the arrivals and departures of the drivers, and that he could give no information whatever. There was evidently nothing to be gained from this ferocious personage; and yet Chupin bowed none the less politely as he left the little office. "This is bad," he growled, as he walked away, for he was really at a loss what to do next; and if not discouraged, he was at least extremely disconcerted and perplexed. Ah! if he had only had a card from the prefecture of police in his pocket, or if he had been more imposing in appearance, he would have encountered no obstacles; he might then have tracked this cab through the streets of Paris as easily as he could have followed a man bearing a lighted lantern through the darkness. But poor and humble, without letters of recommendation, and with no other auxiliaries than his own shrewdness and experience, he had a great deal to contend against. Pausing in his walk, he had taken off his cap and was scratching his head furiously, when suddenly he exclaimed: "What an ass I am!" in so loud a tone that several passers-by turned to see who was applying this unflattering epithet to himself.

Chupin had just remembered one of M. Isidore Fortunat's debtors, a man whom he often visited in the hope of extorting some trifling amount from him, and who was employed in the Central office of the Paris Cab Company. "If any one can help me out of this difficulty, it must be that fellow," he said to himself. "I hope I shall find him at his desk! Come, Victor, my boy, you must look alive!"

However, he could not present himself at the office in the garb he then wore, and so, much against his will, he went home and changed his clothes. Then he took a cab at his own expense, and drove with all possible speed to the main office of the Cab Company, in the Avenue de Ségur. Nevertheless it was already ten o'clock when he arrived there. He was more fortunate than he had dared to hope. The man he wanted had charge of a certain department, and was compelled to return to the office every evening after dinner. He was there now.

He was a poor devil who, while receiving a salary of fifteen hundred francs a year, spent a couple of thousand, and utilized his wits in defending his meagre salary from his creditors. On perceiving Chupin, he made a wrathful gesture, and his first words were: "I haven't got a penny."

But Chupin smiled his most genial smile. "What!" said he, "do you fancy I've come to collect money from you here, and at this hour? You don't know me. I merely came to ask a favour of you."

The clerk's clouded face brightened. "Since that is the case, pray take a seat, and tell me how I can serve you," he replied.

"Very well. At nine o'clock in the evening, on the sixteenth of October,

a lady living in the Rue d'Ulm sent to the stand in the Rue Soufflot for a cab. Her baggage was placed upon it, and she went away no one knows where. However, this lady is a relative of my employer, and he so much wishes to find her that he would willingly give a hundred francs over and above the amount you owe him, to ascertain the number of the vehicle. He pretends that you can give him this number if you choose; and it isn't an impossibility, is it?"

"On the contrary, nothing could be easier," replied the clerk, glad of an opportunity to explain the ingenious mechanism of the office to an outsider. "Have you ten minutes to spare?"

"Ten days, if necessary," rejoined Chupin.

"Then you shall see." So saying the clerk rose and went into the adjoining room, whence a moment later he returned carrying a large green box. "This contains the October reports sent in every evening by the branch offices," he remarked in explanation. He next opened the box, glanced over the documents it contained, and joyfully exclaimed: "Here we have it. This is the report sent in by the superintendent of the cab-stand in the Rue Soufflot on the 16th October. Here is a list of the vehicles that arrived or left from a quarter to nine o'clock till a quarter past nine. Five cabs came in, but we need not trouble ourselves about them. Three went out bearing the numbers 1781, 3025, and 2140. One of these three must have taken your employer's relative."

"Then I must question the three drivers."

The clerk shrugged his shoulders. "What is the use of doing that?' he said, disdainfully. "Ah! you don't understand the way in which we manage our business! The drivers are artful, but the company isn't a fool. By expending a hundred and fifty thousand francs on its detective force every year, it knows what each cab is doing at each hour of the day. I will now look for the reports sent in respecting these three drivers. One of the three will give us the desired information."

This time the search was a considerably longer one, and Chupin was beginning to grow impatient, when the clerk waved a soiled and crumpled sheet of paper triumphantly in the air, and cried: "What did I tell you? This is the report concerning the driver of No. 2140. Listen: Friday, at ten minutes past nine, sent to the Rue d'Ulm— What do you think of that?"

"It's astonishing! But where can I find this driver?"

"I can't say, just at this moment; he's on duty now. But as he belongs to this division he will be back sooner or later, so you had better wait."

"I will wait then; only as I've had no dinner, I'll go out and get a mouthful to eat. I can promise you that M. Fortunat will send you back your note cancelled."

Chupin was really very hungry, and so he rushed off to a little eating-house which he had remarked on his way to the office. There for eighteen sous he dined, or rather supped, like a prince; and as he subsequently treated himself to a cup of coffee and a glass of brandy, as a reward for his toil, some little time had elapsed when he returned to the office. However, No. 2140 had not returned in his absence, so he stationed himself at the door to wait for it.

His patience was severely tried, for it was past midnight when Chupin saw the long-looked-for vehicle enter the courtyard. The driver slowly descended from his box and then went into the cashier's office to pay over his day's earnings, and hand in his report. Then he came out again evidently bound for home. As the servant-woman had said, he was a stout,

jovial-faced man, and he did not hesitate to accept a glass of "no matter what" in a wine-shop that was still open. Whether he believed the story that Chupin told to excuse his questions or not, at all events he answered them very readily. He perfectly remembered having been sent to the Rue d'Ulm, and spoke of his "fare" as a respectable-looking old lady, enumerated the number of her trunks, boxes, and packages, and even described their form. He had taken her to the railway station, stopping at the entrance in the Rue d'Amsterdam; and when the porters inquired, as usual, "Where is this baggage to go?" the old lady had answered, "To London."

Chupin felt decidedly crestfallen on hearing this. He had fancied that Madame Ferailleur had merely announced her intention of driving to the Havre railway station so as to set possible spies on the wrong track, and he would have willingly wagered anything, that after going a short distance she had given the cabman different instructions. Not so, however, he had taken her straight to the station. Was Mademoiselle Marguerite deceived then? Had Pascal really fled from his enemies without an attempt at resistance? Such a course seemed impossible on his part. Thinking over all this, Chupin slept but little that night, and the next morning, before five o'clock, he was wandering about the Rue d'Amsterdam peering into the wine-shops in search of some railway porter. It did not take him long to find one, and having done so, he made him the best of friends in less than no time. Although this porter knew nothing about the matter himself, he took Chupin to a comrade who remembered handling the baggage of an old lady bound for London, on the evening of the sixteenth. However, this baggage was not put into the train after all; the old lady had left it in the cloak-room, and the next day a fat woman of unprepossessing appearance had called for the things, and had taken them away, after paying the charges for storage. This circumstance had been impressed on the porter's mind by the fact that the woman had not given him a farthing gratuity, although he had been much more obliging than the regulations required. However, when she went off, she remarked in a honeyed voice, but with an exceedingly impudent air: "I'll repay you for your kindness, my lad. I keep a wine-shop on the Route d'Asnières, and if you ever happen to pass that way with one of your comrades, come in, and I'll reward you with a famous drink!"

What had exasperated the porter almost beyond endurance, was the certainty he felt that she was mocking him. "For she didn't give me her name or address, the old witch!" he growled. "She had better look out, if I ever get hold of her again!"

But Chupin had already gone off, unmoved by his informant's grievances. Now that he had discovered the stratagem which Madame Ferailleur had employed to elude her pursuers, his conjectures were changed into certainties. This information proved that Pascal *was* concealed somewhere in Paris; but where? If he could only find out this woman who had called for the trunks, it would lead to the discovery of Madame Ferailleur and her son, but how was he to ascertain the woman's whereabouts? She had said that she kept a wine-shop on the Route d'Asnières. Was this true? Was it not more likely that this vague direction was only a fresh precaution?

This much was certain: Chupin, who knew every wine-shop on the Route d'Asnières, did not remember any such powerful matron as the porter had described. He had not forgotten Madame Vantrasson. But to

imagine any bond of interest between Pascal and such a woman as she was, seemed absurd in the extreme. However, as he found himself in such a plight and could not afford to let any chance escape, he repaired merely for form's sake to the Vantrasson establishment. It had not changed in the least since the evening he visited it in company with M. Fortunat—but seen in the full light of day, it appeared even more dingy and dilapidated. Madame Vantrasson was not in her accustomed place, behind the counter, between her black cat—her latest idol—and the bottles from which she prepared her ratafia, now her supreme consolation here below. There was no one in the shop but the landlord. Seated at a table, with a lighted candle near him, he was engaged in an occupation which would have set Chupin's mind working if he had noticed it. Vantrasson had taken some wax from a sealed bottle, and, after melting it at the flame of the candle, he let it drop slowly on to the table. He then pressed a sou upon it, and when the wax had become sufficiently cool and stiff, he removed it from the table without destroying the impression, by means of a thin bladed knife similar to those which glaziers use. However, Chupin did not remark this singular employment. He was engaged in mentally ejaculating, "Good! the old woman isn't here." And as his plan of campaign was already prepared, he entered without further hesitation.

As Vantrasson heard the door turn upon its hinges, he rose so awkwardly, or rather so skilfully, as to let all his implements, wax, knife, and impressions fall on the floor behind the counter. "What can I do to serve you?" he asked, in a husky voice.

"Nothing. I wished to speak with your wife."

"She has gone out. She works for a family in the morning."

This was a gleam of light. Chupin had not thought of the only hypothesis that could explain what seemed inexplicable to him. However, he knew how to conceal his satisfaction, and so with an air of disappointment, he remarked: "That's too bad! I shall be obliged to call again."

"So you have a secret to tell my wife?"

"Not at all."

"Won't I do as well, then?"

"I'll tell you how it is. I'm employed in the baggage room of the western railway station, and I wanted to know if your wife didn't call there a few days ago for some trunks?"

The landlord's features betrayed the vague perturbation of a person who can count the days by his mistakes, and it was with evident hesitation that he replied:

"Yes, my wife went to the Havre station for some baggage last Sunday."

"I thought so. Well, this is my errand: either the clerk forgot to ask her for her receipt, or else he lost it. He can't find it anywhere. I came to ask your wife if she hadn't kept it. When she returns, please deliver my message; and if she has the receipt, pray send it to me through the post."

The ruse was not particularly clever, but it was sufficiently so to deceive Vantrasson. "To whom am I to send this receipt?" he asked.

"To me, Victor Chupin, Faubourg Saint Denis," was the reply.

Imprudent youth! alas, he little suspected what a liberty M. Fortunat had taken with his name on the evening he visited the Vantrassons. But on his side the landlord of the Model Lodging House had not forgotten the name mentioned by the agent. He turned pale with anger on beholding

his supposed creditor, and quickly slipping between the visitor and the door, he said: "So your name is Victor Chupin?"

"Yes, certainly."

"And you are in the employment of the Railway Company?"

"As I just told you."

"That doesn't prevent you from acting as a collector, does it?"

Chupin instinctively recoiled, convinced that he had betrayed himself by some blunder, but unable to discover in what he had erred. "I did do something in that line formerly," he faltered.

Vantrasson doubted no longer. "So you confess that you are a vile scoundrel!" he exclaimed. "You confess that you purchased an old promissory note of mine for fourpence, and then sent a man here to seize my goods! Ah! you'd like to trample the poor under foot, would you! Very well. I have you now, and I'll settle your account! Take that!" And so saying, he dealt his supposed creditor a terrible blow with his clinched fist that sent him reeling to the other end of the shop.

Fortunately, Chupin was very nimble. He did not lose his footing, but sprung over a table and used it as a rampart to shield himself from his dangerous assailant. In the open field, he could easily have protected himself; but here in this narrow space, and hemmed in a corner, he felt that despite this barrier he was lost. "What a devil of a mess!" he thought, as with wonderful agility he avoided Vantrasson's fist, a fist that would have felled an ox. He had an idea of calling for assistance. But would any one hear him? Would any one reply? And if help came, would not the police be sure to hear of the broil? And if they did, would there not be an investigation which would perhaps disturb Pascal's plans? Fearing to injure those whom he wished to serve, he resolved to let himself be hacked to pieces rather than allow a cry to escape him; but he changed his tactics, and instead of attempting to parry the blows as he had done before, he now only thought of gaining the door, inch by inch.

He had almost reached it, but not without suffering considerable injury, when it suddenly opened, and a young man clad in black, with a smooth shaven face, entered the shop, and sternly exclaimed: "Why! what's all this?"

The sight of the new-comer seemed to stupefy Vantrasson. "Ah! it is you, Monsieur Mauméjan?" he faltered, with a crestfallen air. "It's nothing; we were only in fun."

M. Mauméjan seemed perfectly satisfied with this explanation; and in the indifferent tone of a man who is delivering a message, the meaning of which he scarcely understood, he said: "A person who knows that your wife is in my employ requested me to ask you if you would be ready to attend to that little matter she spoke of."

"Certainly. I was preparing for it a moment ago."

Chupin heard no more. He had hurried out, his clothes in disorder, and himself not a little hurt; but his delight made him lose all thought of his injuries. "That's M. Ferailleur," he muttered, "I'm sure of it, and I'm going to prove it." So saying he hid himself in the doorway of a vacant house a few paces distant from the Vantrasson's, and waited.

Then as soon as M. Mauméjan emerged from the Model Lodging House, he followed him. The young man with the clean shaven face walked up the Route d'Asnières, turned to the right into the Route de la Révolte, and at last paused before a house of humble aspect. At that moment Chupin darted towards him, and softly called, "M'sieur Ferailleur!"

The young man turned instinctively. Then seeing his mistake, and feeling that he had betrayed himself, he sprang upon Chupin, and caught him by the wrists: "Scoundrel! who are you?" he exclaimed. "Who has hired you to follow me? What do you want of me?"

"Not so fast, m'sieur! Don't be so rough! You hurt me. I'm sent by Mademoiselle Marguerite!"

XVIII.

"O God! send Pascal to my aid," prayed Mademoiselle Marguerite, as she left M. Fortunat's house. Now she understood the intrigue she had been the victim of; but, instead of reassuring her the agent had frightened her, by revealing the Marquis de Valorsay's desperate plight. She realised what frenzied rage must fill this man's heart as he felt himself gradually slipping from the heights of opulence, down into the depths of poverty and crime. What might he not dare, in order to preserve even the semblance of grandeur for a year, or a month, or a day longer! Had they measured the extent of his villainy? Would he even hesitate at murder? And the poor girl asked herself with a shudder if Pascal were still living; and a vision of his bleeding corpse, lying lifeless in some deserted street, rose before her. And who could tell what dangers threatened her personally? For, though she knew the past, she could not read the future. What did M. de Valorsay's letter mean? and what was the fate that he held in reserve for her, and that made him so sanguine of success? The impression produced upon her mind was so terrible that for a moment she thought of hastening to the old justice of the peace to ask for his protection and a refuge. But this weakness did not last long. Should she lose her energy? Should her will fail her at the decisive moment? "No, a thousand times no!" she said to herself again and again. "I will die if needs be, but I will die fighting!" And the nearer she approached the Rue Pigalle, the more energetically she drove away her apprehension, and sought for an excuse calculated to satisfy any one who might have noticed her long absence.

An unnecessary precaution. She found the house as when she left it, abandoned to the mercy of the servants—the strangers sent the evening before from the employment office. Important matters still kept the General and his wife from home. The husband had to show his horses; and the wife was intent upon shopping. As for Madame Léon, most of her time seemed to be taken up by the family of relatives she had so suddenly discovered. Alone, free from all *espionage*, and wishing to ward off despondency by occupation, Mademoiselle Marguerite was just beginning a letter to her friend the old magistrate, when a servant entered and announced that her dressmaker was there and wished to speak with her. "Let her come in," replied Marguerite, with unusual vivacity. "Let her come in at once."

A lady who looked some forty years of age, plainly dressed, but of distinguished appearance, was thereupon ushered into the room. Like any well-bred modiste, she bowed respectfully while the servant was present, but as soon as he had left the room she approached Mademoiselle Marguerite and took hold of her hands: "My dear young lady," said she, "I am the sister-in-law of your old friend, the magistrate. Having an important message to send to you he was trying to find a person whom he could trust to play the part of a dressmaker, as had been agreed upon be-

tween you, when I offered my services, thinking he could find no one more trusty than myself."

Tears glittered in Mademoiselle Marguerite's eyes. The slightest token of sympathy is so sweet to the heart of the lonely and unfortunate! "How can I ever thank you, madame?" she faltered.

"By not attempting to thank me at all, and by reading this letter as soon as possible."

The note she now produced ran as follows: "My Dear Child—At last I am on the track of the thieves. By conferring with the people from whom M. de Chalusse received the money a couple of days before his death, I have been fortunate enough to obtain from them some minute details respecting the missing bonds, as well as the numbers of the bank-notes which were deposited in the escritoire. With this information, we cannot fail to prove the guilt of the culprits sooner or later. You write me word that the Fondèges are spending money lavishly; try and find out the names of the people they deal with, and communicate them to me. Once more, I tell you that I am sure of success. Courage!"

"Well!" said the spurious dressmaker, when she saw that Marguerite had finished reading the letter. "What answer shall I take my brother-in-law?"

"Tell him that he shall certainly have the information he requires to-morrow. To-day, I can only give him the name of the carriage builder, from whom M. de Fondège has purchased his new carriages."

"Give it to me in writing, it is much the safest way."

Mademoiselle Marguerite did so, and her visitor who, as a woman, was delighted to find herself mixed up in an intrigue, then went off repeating the old magistrate's advice: "Courage!"

But it was no longer necessary to encourage Mademoiselle Marguerite. The assurance of being so effectually helped, had already increased her courage an hundredfold. The future that had seemed so gloomy only a moment before, had now suddenly brightened. By means of the negative in the keeping of the photographer, Carjat, she had the Marquis de Valorsay in her power; and the magistrate, thanks to the numbers of the bank-notes, could soon prove the guilt of the Fondèges. The protection of Providence was made evident in an unmistakeable manner. Thus it was with a placid and almost smiling face that she successively greeted Madame Léon, who returned home quite played out, then Madame de Fondège, who made her appearance attended by two shop-boys overladen with packages, and finally, the General, who brought his son, Lieutenant Gustave, with him to dinner.

The lieutenant was a good-looking fellow of twenty-seven, or thereabouts, with laughing eyes and a heavy moustache. He made a great clanking with his spurs, and wore the somewhat theatrical uniform of the 13th Hussars rather ostentatiously. He bowed to Mademoiselle Marguerite with a smile that was too becoming to be displeasing; and he offered her his arm with an air of triumph to lead her to the dining-room, as soon as the servant came to announce that "Madame la Comtesse was served."

Seated opposite to him at table, the young girl could not refrain from furtively watching the man whom they wished to compel her to marry. Never had she seen such intense self-complacency coupled with such utter mediocrity. It was evident that he was doing his best to produce a favourable impression; but as the dinner progressed, his conversation became rather venturesome. He gradually grew extremely animated; and three or

four adventures of garrison life which he persisted in relating despite his mother's frowns, were calculated to convince his hearers that he was a great favourite with the fair sex. It was the good cheer that loosened his tongue. There could be no possible doubt on that score; and, indeed, while drinking a glass of the Château Laroze, to which Madame Léon had taken such a liking, he was indiscreet enough to declare that if his mother had always kept house in this fashion, he should have been inclined to ask for more frequent leaves of absence.

However, strange to say, after the coffee was served, the conversation languished till at last it died out almost entirely. Madame de Fondège was the first to disappear on the pretext that some domestic affairs required her attention. The General was the next to rise and go out, in order to smoke a cigar; and finally Madame Léon made her escape without saying a word. So Mademoiselle Marguerite was left quite alone with Lieutenant Gustave. It was evident enough to the young girl that this had been preconcerted; and she asked herself what kind of an opinion M. and Madame de Fondège could have of her delicacy. The proceeding made her so indignant that she was on the point of rising from the table and of retiring like the others, when reason restrained her. She said to herself that perhaps she might gain some useful information from this young man, and so she remained.

His face was crimson, and he seemed by far the more embarrassed of the two. He sat with one elbow resting on the table, and with his gaze persistently fixed upon a tiny glass half-full of brandy which he held in his hand, as if he hoped to gain some sublime inspiration from it. At last, after an interval of irksome silence, he ventured to exclaim: "Mademoiselle, should you like to be an officer's wife?"

"I don't know," answered Marguerite.

"Really! But at least you understand my motive in asking this question?"

"No."

Any one but the complacent lieutenant would have been disconcerted by Mademoiselle Marguerite's dry tone; but he did not even notice it. The effort that he was making in his intense desire to be eloquent and persuasive absorbed the attention of all his faculties. "Then permit me to explain, mademoiselle," he resumed. "We meet this evening for the first time, but our acquaintance is not the affair of a day. For I know not how long my father and mother have continually been chanting your praises. 'Mademoiselle Marguerite does this; Mademoiselle Marguerite does that.' They never cease talking of you, declaring that heart, wit, talent, beauty, all womanly charms are united in your person. And they have never wearied of telling me that the man whom you honoured with your preference would be the happiest of mortals. However so far I had no desire to marry, and I distrusted them. In fact, I had conceived a most violent prejudice against you. Yes, upon my honour! I felt sure that I should dislike you; but I have seen you and all is changed. As soon as my eyes fell upon you, I experienced a powerful revulsion of feeling. I was never so smitten in my life—and I said to myself, 'Lieutenant, it is all over—you are caught at last!'"

Pale with anger, astonished and humiliated beyond measure, the young girl listened with her head lowered, vainly trying to find words to express the feelings which disturbed her; but M. Gustave, misunderstanding her silence, and congratulating himself upon the effect he had produced, grew

bolder, and with the tenderest and most impassioned inflection he could impart to his voice, continued: "Who could fail to be impressed as I have been? How could one behold, without rapturous admiration, such beautiful eyes, such glorious black hair, such smiling lips, such a graceful mien, such wonderful charms of person and of mind? How would it be possible to listen, unmoved, to a voice which is clearer and purer than crystal? Ah! my mother's descriptions fell far short of the truth. But how can one describe the perfections of an angel? To any one who has the happiness or the misfortune of knowing you, there can only be one woman in the world!"

He had gradually approached her chair, and now extended his hand to take hold of Marguerite's, and probably raise it to his lips. But she shrank from the contact as from red-hot iron, and rising hurriedly, with her eyes flashing, and her voice quivering with indignation: "Monsieur!" she exclaimed, "Monsieur!"

He was so surprised that he stood as if petrified, with his eyes wide open and his hand still extended. "Permit me—allow me to explain," he stammered. But she declined to listen. "Who has told you that you could address such words to me with impunity?" she continued. "Your parents, I suppose; I daresay they told you to be bold. And that is why they have left us, and why no servant has appeared. Ah! they make me pay dearly for the hospitality they have given me!" As she spoke the tears started from her eyes and glistened on her long lashes. "Whom did you fancy you were speaking to?" she added. "Would you have been so audacious if I had a father or a brother to resent your insults?"

The lieutenant started as if he had been lashed with a whip. "Ah! you are severe!" he exclaimed.

And a happy inspiration entering his mind, he continued: "A man does not insult a woman, mademoiselle, when, while telling her that he loves her and thinks her beautiful, he offers her his name and life."

Mademoiselle Marguerite shrugged her shoulders ironically, and remained for a moment silent. She was very proud, and her pride had been cruelly wounded; but reason told her that a continuation of this scene would render a prolonged sojourn in the General's house impossible; and where could she go, without exciting malevolent remarks? Whom could she ask an asylum of? Still this consideration alone would not have sufficed to silence her. But she remembered that a quarrel and a rupture with the Fondèges would certainly imperil the success of her plans. "So I will swallow even this affront," she said to herself; and then in a tone of melancholy bitterness, she remarked, aloud: "A man cannot set a very high value on his name when he offers it to a woman whom he knows absolutely nothing about."

"Excuse me—you forget that my mother—"

"Your mother has only known me for a week."

An expression of intense surprise appeared on the lieutenant's face. "Is it possible?" he murmured.

"Your father has met me five or six times at the table of the Count de Chalusse, who was his friend—but what does he know of me?" resumed Mademoiselle Marguerite. "That I came to the Hôtel de Chalusse a year ago, and that the count treated me like a daughter—that is all! Who I am, where was I reared, and how, and what my past life has been, these are matters that M. de Fondège knows nothing whatever about."

"My parents told me that you were the daughter of the Count de Chalusse mademoiselle."

"What proof have they of it? They ought to have told you that I was an unfortunate foundling, with no other name than that of Marguerite."

"Oh!"

"They ought to have told you that I am poor, very poor, and that I should probably have been reduced to the necessity of toiling for my daily bread, if it had not been for them."

An incredulous smile curved the lieutenant's lips. He fancied that Mademoiselle Marguerite only wished to prove his disinterestedness, and this thought restored his assurance. "Perhaps you are exaggerating a little, mademoiselle," he replied.

"I am not exaggerating—I possess but ten thousand francs in the world—I swear it by all that I hold sacred."

"That would not even be the dowry required of an officer's wife by law,' muttered the lieutenant.

Was his incredulity sincere or affected? What had his parents really told him? Had they confided everything to him, and was he their accomplice? or had they told him nothing? All these questions flashed rapidly through Marguerite's mind. "You suppose that I am rich, monsieur," she resumed at last. "I understand that only too well. If I was, you ought to shun me as you would shun a criminal, for I could only be wealthy through a crime."

"Mademoiselle—"

"Yes, through a crime. After M. de Chalusse's death, two million francs that had been placed in his escritoire for safe keeping, could not be found. Who stole the money? I myself have been accused of the theft. Your father must have told you of this, as well as of the cloud of suspicion that is still hanging over me."

She paused, for the lieutenant had become whiter than his shirt. "Good God!" he exclaimed in a tone of horror, as if a terrible light had suddenly broken upon his mind. He made a movement as if to leave the room, but suddenly changing his mind, he bowed low before Mademoiselle Marguerite, and said, in a husky voice: "Forgive me, mademoiselle, I did not know what I was doing. I have been misinformed. I have been beguiled by false hopes. I entreat you to say that you forgive me."

"I forgive you, monsieur."

But still he lingered. "I am only a poor devil of a lieutenant," he resumed, "with no other fortune than my epaulettes, no other prospects than an uncertain advancement. I have been foolish and thoughtless. I have committed many acts of folly; but there is nothing in my past life for which I have cause to blush." He looked fixedly at Mademoiselle Marguerite, as if he were striving to read her inmost soul; and in a solemn tone, that contrasted strangely with his usual levity of manner, he added: "If the name I bear should ever be compromised, my prospects would be blighted forever! The only course left for me would be to tender my resignation. I will leave nothing undone to preserve my honour in the eyes of the world, and to right those who have been wronged. Promise me not to interfere with my plans."

Mademoiselle Marguerite trembled like a leaf. She now realized her terrible imprudence. He had divined everything. As she remained silent, he continued wildly: "I entreat you. Do you wish me to beg you at your feet?"

Ah! it was a terrible sacrifice that he demanded of her. But how could she remain obdurate in the presence of such intense anguish? "I will

remain neutral," she replied, "that is all I can promise. Providence shall decide."

"Thank you," he said, sadly, suspecting that perhaps it was already too late—"thank you." Then he turned to go, and, in fact, he had already opened the door, when a forlorn hope brought him back to Mademoiselle Marguerite, whose hand he took, timidly faltering, "We are friends, are we not?"

She did not withdraw her icy hand, and in a scarcely audible voice, she repeated: "We are friends?"

Convinced that he could obtain nothing more from her than her promised neutrality, the lieutenant thereupon hastily left the room, and she sank back in her chair more dead than alive. "Great God! what is coming now?" she murmured.

She thought she could understand the unfortunate young man's intentions, and she listened with a throbbing heart, expecting to hear a stormy explanation between his parents and himself. In point of fact, she almost immediately afterwards heard the lieutenant inquire in a stern imperious voice: "Where is my father?"

"The General has just gone to his club."

"And my mother?"

"A friend of hers called a few moments ago to take her to the opera."

"What madness!"

That was all. The outer door opened and closed again with extreme violence, and then Marguerite heard nothing save the sneering remarks of the servants.

It was, indeed, madness on the part of M. and Madame de Fondège not to have waited to learn the result of this interview, planned by themselves, and upon which their very lives depended. But delirium seemed to have seized them since, thanks to a still inexplicable crime, they had suddenly found themselves in possession of an immense fortune. Perhaps in this wild pursuit of pleasure, in the haste they displayed to satisfy their covetous longings, they hoped to forget or silence the threatening voice of conscience. Such was Mademoiselle Marguerite's conclusion; but she was not long left to undisturbed meditation. By the lieutenant's departure the restrictions which had been placed upon the servants' movements had evidently been removed, for they came in to clear the table.

Having with some little difficulty obtained a candle from one of these model servants, Mademoiselle Marguerite now retired to her own room. In her anxiety, she forgot Madame Léon, but the latter had not forgotten her; she was even now listening at the drawing-room door, inconsolable to think that she had not succeeded in hearing at least part of the conversation between the lieutenant and her dear young lady. Marguerite had no wish to reflect over what had occurred. As she was determined to keep the promise which Lieutenant Gustave had wrung from her, it mattered little whether she had committed a great mistake in allowing him to discover her knowledge of his parent's guilt, and in listening to his entreaties. A secret presentiment warned her that the punishment which would overtake the General and his wife would be none the less terrible, despite her own forbearance, and that they would find their son more inexorable than the severest judge.

The essential thing was to warn the old magistrate; and so in a couple of pages she summarized the scene of the evening, feeling sure that she would find an opportunity to post her letter on the following day. This

duty accomplished, she took a book and went to bed, hoping to drive away her gloomy thoughts by reading. But the hope was vain. Her eyes read the words, followed the lines and crossed the pages, but her mind utterly refused to obey her will, and in spite of all her efforts persisted in turning to the shrewd youth who had solemnly sworn to find Pascal for her. A little after midnight Madame de Fondège returned from the opera, and at once proceeded to reprimand her maid for not having lighted a fire. The General returned some time afterwards, and he was evidently in the best of spirits.

"They have not seen their son," said Mademoiselle Marguerite to herself, and this anxiety, combined with many others, tortured her so cruelly, that she did not fall asleep until near daybreak. Even then she did not slumber long. It was scarcely half-past seven when she was aroused by a strange commotion and a loud sound of hammering. She was trying to imagine the cause of all this uproar, when Madame de Fondège, already arrayed in a marvellous robe composed of three skirts and an enormous puff, entered the room. "I have come to take you away, my dear child," she exclaimed. "The owner of the house has decided to make some repairs, and the workmen have already invaded our apartments. The General has taken flight, let us follow his example—so make yourself beautiful and we'll go at once."

Without a word, the young girl hastened to obey, while Madame de Fondège expatiated on the delightful drive they would take together in the wonderful brougham which the general had purchased a couple of days before. As for Lieutenant Gustave, she did not even mention his name.

Accustomed to the superb equipages of the Chalusse establishment, Mademoiselle Marguerite did not consider the much lauded brougham at all remarkable. At the most, it was very showy, having apparently been selected with a view to attracting as much attention as possible. Madame de Fondège was not in a mood to consider this an objection that morning. She was evidently in a nervous state of mind, extremely restless and excited, indeed it seemed impossible for her to keep still. In default of something better to do, she visited at least a dozen shops, asking to see everything, finding everything frightful, and purchasing without regard to price. It might have been fancied that she wished to buy all Paris. About ten o'clock she dragged Marguerite to Van Klopen's. Received as a *habituée* of the establishment, thanks to the numerous orders she had given within the past few days, she was even allowed to enter the mysterious saloon in which the illustrious ruler of Fashion served such of his clients as had a predeliction for absinthe or madeira. On leaving the place, and before entering the carriage again, Madame de Fondège turned to Marguerite and inquired: "Where shall we go now? I have given the servants an 'outing' on account of the workmen, and we cannot breakfast at home. Why can't we go to a restaurant, we two? Many of the most distinguished ladies are in the habit of doing so. You will see how people will look at us! I am sure it will amuse you immensely."

"Ah! madame, you forget that it is not a fortnight since the count's death!"

Madame de Fondège was about to make an impatient reply, but she mastered the impulse, and in a tone of hypocritical compassion, exclaimed: "Poor child! poor, dear child! that's true. I had forgotten. Well, such being the case, we'll go and ask Baroness Trigault to give us our breakfast. You will see a lovely woman." And addressing the coachman she in-

structed him to drive to the Trigault mansion in the Rue de la Ville-l'Evêque.

When Madame de Fondège's brougham drew up before the door, the baron was standing in the courtyard with a cigar between his teeth, examining a pair of horses which had been sent him on approbation. He did not like his wife's friend, and he usually avoided her. But precisely because he was acquainted with the General's crime and Pascal's plans, he thought it politic to seem amiable. So, on recognising Madame de Fondège through the carriage window, he hastened forward with outstretched hand to assist her in alighting. "Did you come to take breakfast with us?" he asked. "That would be a most delightful—

The remainder of the sentence died unuttered upon his lips. His face became crimson, and the cigar he was holding slipped from his fingers. He had just perceived Mademoiselle Marguerite, and his consternation was so apparent that Madame de Fondège could not fail to remark it; however she attributed it to the girl's remarkable beauty. "This is Mademoiselle de Chalusse, my dear baron," said she, "the daughter of the noble and esteemed friend whom we so bitterly lament."

Ah! it was not necessary to tell the baron who this young girl was; he knew it only too well. He was not overcome for long; a thought of vengeance speedily flashed through his mind. It seemed to him that Providence itself offered him the means of putting an end to an intolerable situation. Regaining his self-control by a powerful effort, he preceded Madame de Fondège through the magnificent apartments of the mansion, lightly saying: "My wife is in her *boudoir*. She will be delighted to see you. But first of all, I have a good secret to confide to you. So let me take this young lady to the baroness, and you and I can join them in a moment!" Thereupon, without waiting for any rejoinder, he took Marguerite's arm and led her towards the end of the hall. Then opening a door, he exclaimed in a mocking voice: "Madame Trigault, allow me to present to you the daughter of the Count de Chalusse." And adding in a whisper: "This is your mother, young girl," he pushed the astonished Marguerite into the room, closed the door, and returned to Madame de Fondège.

Paler than her white muslin wrapper, the Baroness Trigault sprang from her chair. This was the woman who, while her husband was braving death to win fortune for her, had been dazzled by the Count de Chalusse's wealth, and who, later in life, when she was the richest of the rich, had sunk into the very depths of degradation—had stooped, indeed, to a Coralth! The baroness had once been marvellously beautiful, and even now, many murmurs of admiration greeted her when she dashed through the Champs Elysées in her magnificent equipage, attired in one of those eccentric costumes which she alone dared to wear. She was a type of the wife created by the customs of fashionable society; the woman who feels elated when her name appears in the newspapers, and in the chronicles of Parisian "high life;" who has no thought of her deserted fireside, but is ever tormented by a terrible thirst for bustle and excitement; whose head is empty, and whose heart is dry—the woman who only exists for the world; and who is devoured by unappeasable covetousness, and who, at times, envies an actress's liberty, and the notoriety of the leaders of the *demi-monde;* the woman who is always in quest of fresh excitement, and fails to find it; the woman who is *blasée*, and prematurely old in mind and body, and who yet still clings despairingly to her fleeting youth.

Inaccessible to any emotion but vanity, the baroness had never shed a tear over her husband's sufferings. She was sure of her absolute power over him. What did the rest matter? She even gloried in her knowledge that she could make this man—who loved her in spite of everything—at one moment furious with rage or wild with grief, and then an instant afterwards plunge him into the rapture of a senseless ecstasy by a word, a smile, or a caress. For such was her power, and she often exercised it mercilessly. Even after the frightful scene that Pascal had witnessed, she had made another appeal to the baron, and he had been weak enough to give her the thirty thousand francs which M. de Coralth needed to purchase his wife's silence.

However, this time the baroness trembled. Her usual shrewdness had not deserted her, and she perfectly understood all that Marguerite's presence in that house portended. Since her husband brought this young girl —her daughter—to her, he must know everything, and have taken some fatal resolution. Had she, indeed, exhausted the patience which she had fancied inexhaustible? She was not ignorant of the fact that her husband had disposed of his immense fortune in a way that would enable him to say and prove that he was insolvent whenever occasion required; and if he found courage to apply for a legal separation, what could she hope to obtain from the courts? A bare living, almost nothing. In such a case, how could she exist? She would be compelled to spend her last years in the same poverty that had made her youth so wretched. She saw herself—ah! what a frightful misfortune—turned out of her princely home, and reduced to furnished apartments rented for five hundred francs a year!

Mademoiselle Marguerite was no less startled and horror-stricken than Madame Trigault, and she stood rooted to the spot, exactly where the baron had left her. Silent and motionless, they confronted each other for a moment which seemed a century to both of them. The resemblance which had astonished Pascal could not fail to strike them, for it was still more noticeable now that they stood face to face. But anything was preferable to this torturing suspense, and so, summoning all her courage, the baroness broke the silence by saying: "You are the daughter of the Count de Chalusse?"

"I think so, but I have no proofs of it."

"And—your mother?"

"I do not know her, madame, and I have no desire to know her."

Disconcerted by this brief but implacable reply, Madame Trigault hung her head.

"What could I have to say to my mother?" continued Marguerite. "That I hate her? My courage would fail me to do so. And yet, how can I think without bitterness of the woman who, after abandoning me herself, endeavoured to deprive me of my father's love and protection? I could have forgiven anything but that. Ah! I have not always been so patient and resigned! The laws of our country do not forbid illegitimate children to search for their parents, and more than once I have said to myself that I would discover my mother, and have my revenge."

"But you have no means of discovering her?"

"In this you are greatly mistaken, madame. After the Count de Chalusse's death, a package of letters, a glove, and some withered flowers were found in one of the drawers of his escritoire."

The baroness started back as if a yawning chasm had suddenly opened at

ner feet. "My letters!" she exclaimed. "Ah! wretched woman that I am, he kept them! It is all over! I am lost, for of course, they have been read."

"The ribbon securing them together has not even been untied."

"Is that true? Don't deceive me! Where are they, then—where are they?"

"Under the protection of the seals affixed by the justice of the peace."

Madame Trigault tottered, as if she were about to fall. "Then it is only a reprieve," she moaned, "and I am none the less ruined. Those cursed letters will necessarily be read, and all will be discovered. They will see—" The thought of what they would see endowed her with the energy of despair, and clutching hold of Marguerite s wrists: "Listen!" said she, approaching so near that her hot breath scorched the girl's cheeks, "no one must be allowed to see those letters!—it must not be! I will tell you what they contain. I hated my husband; I loved the Count de Chalusse madly, and he had sworn that he would marry me if ever I became a widow. Do you understand now? The name of the poison I obtained—how I proposed to administer it, and what its effects would be—all this is plainly written in my own handwriting and signed—yes, signed—with my own name. The plot failed, but it was none the less real, positive, palpable—and those letters are a proof of it. But they shall never be read—no—not if I am obliged to set fire to the Hôtel de Chalusse with my own hand."

Now the count's constant terror, the fear with which this woman had inspired him, were explained. He was an accomplice—he also had written no doubt, and she had preserved his letters as he had preserved hers. Crime had bound them indissolubly together.

Horrified beyond expression, Marguerite freed herself from Madame Trigault's grasp. "I swear to you, madame, that everything any human being can do to save your letters shall be done by me," she exclaimed.

"And have you any hope of success?"

"Yes," replied the girl, remembering her friend, the magistrate.

Moved by a far more powerful emotion than any she had ever known before, the baroness uttered an exclamation of joy. "Ah! how good you are!" she exclaimed—"how generous! how noble! You take your revenge in giving me back life, honour, everything—for you are my daughter; do you not know it? Did they not tell you, before bringing you here that I was the hated and unnatural mother who abandoned you?"

She advanced with tearful eyes and outstretched arms, but Marguerite sternly waved her back. "Spare yourself, madame, and spare me, the humiliation of an unnecessary explanation."

"Marguerite! Good God! you repulse me. After all you have promised to do for me, will you not forgive me?"

"I will try to forget, madame," replied the girl and she was already stepping towards the door when the baroness threw herself at her feet, crying, in a heart-rending tone. "Have pity, Marguerite, I am your mother. One has no right to deny one's own mother."

But the young girl passed on. "My mother is dead, madame; I do not know you!" And she left the room without even turning her head, without even glancing at the baroness, who had fallen upon the floor in a deep swoon.

XIX.

Baron Trigault still held Madame de Fondège a prisoner in the hall. What did he say to her in justification of the expedient he had improvised? His own agitation was so great that he himself scarcely knew, and it mattered but little after all, for the good lady did not even pretend to listen to his apologies. Although by no means over shrewd, she suspected some great mystery, some choice bit of scandal, perhaps, and her eyes never once wandered from the door leading to the boudoir. At last this door opened again, and Mademoiselle Marguerite reappeared. "Great heavens!" exclaimed Madame de Fondège; "what has happened to my poor child?"

For the unfortunate girl advanced with an automatic tread, her eyes fixed on vacancy, and her hands outstretched, as if feeling her way. It indeed seemed to her as if the floor swayed to and fro under her feet, as if the walls tottered, as if the ceiling were about to fall upon her and crush her.

Madame de Fondège sprang forward. "What is the matter, my dearest?"

Alas! the poor girl was utterly overcome. "It is but a trifle," she faltered. But her eyes closed, her hands clutched wildly for some support, and she would have fallen to the ground if the baron had not caught her in his arms and carried her to a sofa. "Help!" cried Madame de Fondège, "help, she is dying!—a physician!"

But there was no need of a physician. One of the maids came with some fresh water and a bottle of smelling salts, and Marguerite soon recovered sufficiently to sit up, and cast a frightened glance around her, while she mechanically passed her hand again and again over her cold forehead. "Do you feel better, my darling?" inquired Madame de Fondège at last.

"Yes."

"Ah! you gave me a terrible fright; see how I tremble." But the worthy lady's fright was as nothing in comparison with the curiosity that tortured her. It was so powerful, indeed, that she could not control it. "What has happened?" she asked.

"Nothing, madame, nothing."

"But—"

"I am subject to such attacks. I was very cold, and the heat of the room made me feel faint."

Although she could only speak with the greatest difficulty, the baron realised by her tone that she would never reveal what had taken place, and his gratitude and relief knew no bounds. "Don't tire the poor child," he said to Madame de Fondège. "The best thing you can do would be to take her home and put her to bed."

"I agree with you; but, unfortunately, I have sent away my brougham with orders not to return for me until one o'clock."

"Is that the only difficulty? If so, you shall have a carriage at once, my dear madame." So saying, the baron made a sign to one of the servants, and the man started on his mission at once.

Madame de Fondège was silent but furious. "He is actually putting me out of doors," she thought. "This is a little too much! And why doesn't the baroness make her appearance—she must certainly have heard

my voice? What does it all mean? However, I'm sure Marguerite will tell me when we are alone."

But Madame de Fondège was wrong, for she vainly plied the girl with questions all the way from the Rue de la Ville l'Evêque to the Rue Pigalle. She could only obtain this unvarying and obstinate reply: "Nothing has happened. What do you suppose could have happened?"

Never in her whole life had Madame de Fondège been so incensed. "The blockhead!" she mentally exclaimed. "Who ever saw such obstinacy! Hateful creature!—I could beat her!"

She did not beat her, but on reaching the house she eagerly asked: "Do you feel strong enough to go up stairs alone?"

"Yes, madame."

"Then I will leave you. You know Van Klopen expects me again at one o'clock precisely; and I have not breakfasted yet. Remember that my servants are at your disposal, and don't hesitate to call them. You are at home, recollect."

It was not without considerable difficulty—not without being compelled to stop and rest several times on her way up stairs—that Mademoiselle Marguerite succeeded in reaching the apartments of the Fondège family. "Where is madame?" inquired the servant who opened the door.

"She is still out."

"Will she return to dinner?"

"I don't know."

"M. Gustave has been here three times already; he was very angry when he found that there was no one at home—he went on terribly. Besides, the workmen have turned everything topsy-turvy."

However, Marguerite had already reached her own room, and thrown herself on the bed. She was suffering terribly. Her brave spirit still retained its energy; but the flesh had succumbed. Every vein and artery throbbed with violence, and while a chill seemed to come to her heart, her head burned as if it had been on fire. "My Lord," she thought, "am I going to fall ill at the last moment, just when I have most need of all my strength?"

She tried to sleep, but was unable to do so. How could she free herself from the thought that haunted her? Her mother! To think that such a woman was her mother! Was it not enough to make her die of sorrow and shame? And yet this woman must be saved—the proofs of her crime must be annihilated with her letters. Marguerite asked herself whether the old magistrate would have it in his power to help her in this respect. Perhaps not, and then what could she do? She asked herself if she had not been too cruel, too severe. Guilty or not, the baroness was still her mother. Had she the right to be pitiless, when by stretching out her hand she might, perhaps, have rescued the wretched woman from her terrible life.

Thus thinking, the young girl sat alone and forgotten in her little room. The hours went by, and daylight had begun to wane, when suddenly a shrill whistle resounded in the street, under her windows. "Pi—ouit." It came upon her like an electric shock, and with a bound she sprang to her feet. For this cry was the signal that had been agreed upon between herself and the young man who had so abruptly offered to help her on the occasion of her visit to M. Fortunat's office. Was she mistaken? No—for on listening she heard the cry resound a second time, even more shrill and prolonged than before.

This was no time for hesitation, and so she went down stairs at once.

Hope sent new blood coursing through her veins and endowed her with invincible energy. On reaching the street-door, she paused and looked around her. At a short distance off she perceived a young fellow clad in a blouse, who was apparently engaged in examining the goods displayed in a shop window. Despite his position, he saw her also, for coming nearer, he hurriedly exclaimed: "Follow me at a little distance in the rear until I stop."

Marguerite obeyed him in breathless suspense. The young fellow was our friend Victor Chupin, now somewhat the worse for his encounter with Vantrasson that same morning. His face was considerably disfigured, and one of his eyes was black and swollen; nevertheless he was in a state of ecstatic happiness. Happy, and yet anxious; for, as he preceded Mademoiselle Marguerite, he said to himself: "How shall I tell her that I have succeeded? There must be no folly. If I tell her the news suddenly, she will most likely faint, so I must break the news gently."

On reaching the Rue Boursault, he turned the corner, and paused, waiting for Mademoiselle Marguerite to join him. "What is the news?" she anxiously asked.

"Everything is progressing finely—slowly, but finely."

"You know something, monsieur! Speak! Don't you see how anxious I am?"

He did see it only too well; and his embarrassment increased to such a pitch that he began to scratch his head furiously. At last he decided on a plan. "First of all, mademoiselle, brace yourself against the wall, and now stand firm. Yes, like that. Now, are you all right? Well, I have found M. Ferailleur!"

Chupin's precaution was a wise one, for Marguerite tottered. Such a success, so quickly gained, was indeed astounding. "Is it possible?" she murmured.

"So possible that I have a letter for you from M. Ferailleur in my pocket, mademoiselle. Here it is—I am to wait for an answer."

She took the note he handed her, broke the seal with trembling hand, and read as follows: "We are approaching the end, my dearest. One step more, and we shall triumph. But I must see you to-day at any risk. Leave the house this evening at eight o'clock. My mother will be waiting for you in a cab, at the corner of the Rue Pigalle and the Rue Boursault. Come, and let no fear of arousing the suspicions of the Fondèges deter you. They are henceforth powerless to injure you. PASCAL."

"I will go!" replied Marguerite at once, careless of the obstacles that might impede the fulfilment of her promise. For it was quite possible that serious difficulties might arise. Madame Léon, who had been invisible since the morning, might suddenly reappear, or the General and his wife might return to dinner. And what could Marguerite answer if they asked her where she wanted to go alone, and at such an hour of the evening? And if they attempted to prevent her from keeping her appointment, how could she resist? All these were weighty questions and yet she did not hesitate. Pascal had spoken; that sufficed, and she was determined to obey him implicitly, cost what it might. If he advised such a step, it was because he deemed it best and necessary; and she willingly submitted to the instructions of the man in whom she felt such unbounded confidence.

Having told Chupin that she might be relied upon for the evening, she was retracing her way home, when suddenly the thought occurred to her

that she ought not to neglect this opportunity to place a decisive weapon in Pascal's hands. She was close to the Rue Notre Dame de Lorette and so without more ado she hurried to the establishment of Carjat the photographer. He was fortunately disengaged, and she at once obtained from him a proof of the compromising letter written by the Marquis de Valorsay to Madame Léon. She placed it carefully in her pocket, thanked the photographer, and then hurried back to the Rue Pigalle to wait for the hour appointed in Pascal's letter. Fortunately none of her unpleasant apprehensions were realised. The dinner-hour came and passed, and still the house remained deserted. The workmen had gone off and the laughter and chatter of the servants in the kitchen were the only sounds that broke the stillness. Faint for want of food—for she had taken no nourishment during the day—Marguerite had considerable difficulty in obtaining something to eat from the servants. At last, however, they gave her some soup and cold meat, served on a corner of the bare table in the dining-room. It was half-past seven when she finished this frugal meal. She waited a moment, and then fearing she might keep Madame Ferailleur waiting, she went down into the street.

A cab was waiting at the corner of the Rue Boursault, as indicated. Its windows were lowered, and in the shade one could discern the face and white hair of an elderly lady. Glancing behind her to assure herself that she had not been followed, Marguerite eagerly approached the vehicle, whereupon a kindly voice exclaimed: "Jump in quickly, mademoiselle."

Marguerite obeyed, and the door was scarcely closed behind her before the driver had urged his horse into a gallop. He had evidently received his instructions in advance, as well as the promise of a magnificent gratuity.

Sitting side by side on the back seat, the old lady and the young girl remained silent, but this did not prevent them from casting stealthy glances at each other, and striving to distinguish one another's features whenever the vehicle passed in front of some brilliantly lighted shop. They had never met before, and their anxiety to become acquainted was intense, for they each felt that the other would exert a decisive influence upon her life. All of Madame Ferailleur's friends would undoubtedly have been surprised at the step she had taken, and yet it was quite in accordance with her character. As long as she had entertained any hope of preventing this marriage she had not hesitated to express and even exaggerate her objections and repugnance. But her point of view was entirely changed when, conquered by the strength of her son's passion, she at last yielded a reluctant consent. The young girl who was destined to be her daughter-in-law at once became sacred in her eyes; and it seemed to her an act of duty to watch over Marguerite, and shield her reputation. Having considered the subject, she had decided that is was not proper for her son's betrothed to run about the streets alone in the evening. Might it not compromise her honour? and later on might it not furnish venomous Madame de Fondège with an opportunity to exercise her slanderous tongue? Thus the puritanical old lady had come to fetch Marguerite, so that whenever occasion required she might be able to say: "I was there!"

As for Marguerite, after the trials of the day, she yielded without reserve to the feeling of rest and happiness that now filled her heart. Again and again had Pascal spoken of his mother's prejudices and the inflexibility of her principles. But he had also spoken of her dauntless energy, the nobility of her nature, and of her love and devotion to him. With Marguerite

moreover, one consideration—one which she would scarcely have admitted, perhaps—outweighed all others: Madame Ferailleur was Pascal's mother. For that reason alone, if for no other, she was prepared to worship her. How fervently she blessed this noble woman, who, a widow, and ruined in fortune by an unprincipled scoundrel, had bravely toiled to educate her son, making him the man whom Marguerite had freely chosen from among all others. She would have knelt before this grand but simple-hearted mother had she dared; she would have kissed her hands. And a poignant regret came to her heart when she remembered her own mother, Baroness Trigault, and compared her with this matchless woman.

Meanwhile the cab had passed the outer boulevards, and was now whirling along the Route d'Asnières, as fast as the horse could drag it. "We are almost there," remarked Madame Ferailleur, speaking for the first time.

Marguerite's response was inaudible; she was so overcome with emotion. The driver had just turned the corner of the Route de la Révolte; and it was not long before he checked his panting horse. "Look, mademoiselle," said Madame Ferailleur again, "this is our home."

Upon the threshold, bareheaded, and breathless with impatience and hope, stood a man who was counting the seconds with the violent throbbings of his heart. He did not wait for the cab to stop, but springing to the door, he opened it; and then, catching Marguerite in his arms, he carried her into the house with a cry of joy. She had not even time to look around her, ere he had placed her in an arm-chair, and fallen on his knees before her. "At last I see you again, my beloved Marguerite," he exclaimed. "You are mine—nothing shall part us again!"

They sobbed in each other's arms. They could bear adversity unmoved; but their composure deserted them in this excess of happiness; and standing in the door-way, Madame Ferailleur felt the tears come to her eyes as she stood watching them.

"How can I tell you all that I have suffered!" said Pascal, whose voice was hoarse with feeling. "The papers have told you all the details, I suppose. How I was accused of cheating at cards; how the vile epithet 'thief' was cast in my face; how they tried to search me; how my most intimate friends deserted me; how I was virtually expelled from the Palais de Justice. All this is terrible, is it not? Ah, well! it is nothing in comparison with the intense, unendurable anguish I experienced in thinking that you believed the infamous calumny which disgraced me."

Marguerite rose to her feet. "You thought that!" she exclaimed. "You believed that I doubted you? I! Like you, I have been accused of robbery myself. Do you believe me guilty?"

"Good God! *I* suspect you!"

"Then why—"

"I was mad, Marguerite, my only love, I was mad! But who would not have lost his senses under such circumstances? It was the very day after this atrocious conspiracy. I had seen Madame Léon, and had trusted her with a letter for you in which I entreated you to grant me five minutes' conversation."

"Alas! I never received it."

"I know that now; but then I was deceived. I went to the little garden gate to await your coming, but it was Madame Léon who appeared. She brought me a note written in pencil and signed with your name, bidding me an eternal farewell. And, fool that I was, I did not see that the note was a forgery!"

Mademoiselle Marguerite was amazed. The veil was now torn aside, and the truth revealed to her. Now she remembered Madame Léon's embarrassment when she met her returning from the garden on the night following the count's death. "Ah, well! Pascal," she said. "do you know what I was doing at almost the same moment? Alarmed at having received no news from you, I hastened to the Rue d'Ulm, where I learned that you had sold your furniture and started for America. Any other woman might have believed herself deserted under such circumstances, but not I. I felt sure that you had not fled in ignominious fashion. I was convinced that you had only concealed yourself for a time in order to strike your enemies more surely."

"Do not shame me, Marguerite. It is true that of us two I showed myself the weaker."

Lost in the rapture of the present moment, they had forgotten the past and the future, the agony they had endured, the dangers that still threatened them, and even the existence of their enemies.

But Madame Ferailleur was watching. She pointed to the clock, and earnestly exclaimed: "Time is passing, my son. Each moment that is wasted endangers our success. Should any suspicion bring Madame Vantrasson here, all would be lost."

"She cannot come upon us unawares, my dear mother. Chupin has promised not to lose sight of her. If she stirs from her shop, he will hasten here and throw a stone against the shutters to warn us."

But even this did not satisfy Madame Ferailleur.

"You forget, Pascal," she insisted, "that Mademoiselle Marguerite must be at home again by ten o'clock, if she consents to the ordeal you feel obliged to impose upon her."

This was the voice of duty recalling Pascal to the stern realities of life. He slowly rose, conquered his emotion, and, after reflecting for a moment, said: "First of all, Marguerite, I owe you the truth and an exact statement of our situation. Circumstances have compelled me to act without consulting you. Have I done right or wrong? You shall judge." And without stopping to listen to the girl's protestations, he rapidly explained how he had managed to win M. de Valorsay's confidence, discover his plans, and become his trusted accomplice. "This scoundrel's plan is very simple," he continued. "He is determined to marry you. Why? Because, though you are not aware of it, you are rich, and the sole heiress to the fortune of the Count de Chalusse, your father. This surprises you, does it not? Very well! listen to me. Deceived by the Marquis de Valorsay, the Count de Chalusse had promised him your hand. These arrangements were nearly completed, though you had not been informed of them. In fact, everything had been decided. At the outset, however, a grave difficulty had presented itself. The marquis wished your father to acknowledge you before your marriage, but this he refused to do. 'It would expose me to the most frightful dangers,' he declared. 'However, I will recognize Marguerite as my daughter in my will, and, at the same time, leave all my property to her.' But the marquis would not listen to this proposal. 'I don't doubt your good intentions, my dear count,' said he, 'but suppose this will should be contested, your property might pass into other hands.' This difficulty put a stop to the proceedings for some time. The marquis asked for guarantees; the other refused to give them—until, at last, M. de Chalusse discovered an expedient which would satisfy both parties. He confided to M. de Valorsay's keeping a will in which he re-

cognized you as his daughter, and bequeathed you his entire fortune. This document, the validity of which is unquestionable, has been carefully preserved by the marquis. He has not spoken of its existence; and he would destroy it rather than restore it to you at present. But as soon as you became his wife, he intended to produce it and thus obtain possession of the count's millions."

"Ah! the old justice of the peace was not mistaken," murmured Mademoiselle Marguerite.

Pascal did not hear her. All his faculties were absorbed in the attempt he was making to give a clear and concise explanation, for he had much to say, and it was growing late. "As for the enormous sum you have been accused of taking," he continued, "I know what has become of it; it is in the hands of M. de Fondège."

"I know that, Pascal—I'm sure of it; but the proof, the proof!"

"The proof exists, and, like the will, it is in the hands of the Marquis de Valorsay."

"Is it possible! Great Heavens! You are sure you are not deceived?"

"I have seen the proof, and it is overpowering, irrefutable! I have touched it—I have held it in my hands. And it explains everything which may have seemed strange and incomprehensible to you. The letter which M. de Chalusse received on the day of his death was written by his sister. She asked in it for her share of the family estate, threatening him with a terrible scandal if he refused to comply with her request. Had the count decided to brave this scandal rather than yield? We have good reason to suppose so. However, this much is certain: he had a terrible hatred, not so much for his sister, perhaps, as for the man who had seduced her, and afterwards married her, actuated by avaricious motives alone. He had sworn thousands of times that neither husband nor wife should ever have a penny of the large fortune which really belonged to them. Believing that a lawsuit was now inevitable, and wishing to conceal his wealth, he was greatly embarrassed by the large amount of money he had on hand. What should he do with it? Where could he hide it? He finally decided to intrust it to the keeping of M. de Fondège, who was known as an eccentric man, but whose honesty seemed to be above suspicion. So, when he left home, on the afternoon of his illness, he took the package of bank-notes and bonds, which you had noticed in the escritoire that morning, away with him. We shall never know what passed between your father and the General—we can only surmise. But what I do know, and what I shall be able to prove, is that M. de Fondège accepted the trust, and that he gave an acknowledgment of it in the form of a letter, which read as follows:—'My Dear Count de Chalusse,—I hereby acknowledge the receipt, on Thursday, October 15, 186—, of the sum of two millions, two hundred and fifty thousand francs, which I shall deposit, in my name, at the Bank of France, subject to the orders of Mademoiselle Marguerite, your daughter, on the day she presents this letter. And believe, my dear count, in the absolute devotion of your old comrade, General de Fondege.'"

Mademoiselle Marguerite was thunderstruck. "Who can have furnished you with these particulars?" she inquired.

"The Marquis de Valorsay, my dearest; and I will explain how he was enabled to do so. M. de Fondège wrote the address of his 'old comrade' on this letter, which was folded and sealed, but not enclosed in an envelope. M. de Chalusse proposed to post it himself, so that the official stamp might authenticate its date. But on reflection, he became uneasy. He felt that

this tiny, perishable scrap of paper would be the only proof of the deposit which he had confided to M. de Fondège's honour. This scrap might be lost, burned, or stolen. Then what would happen? He had so often seen trustees betray the confidence of which they had seemed worthy. So M. de Chalusse racked his brains to discover a means of protection from an improbable but possible misfortune. He found it. Passing a stationer's shop, he went in, purchased one of those letter-presses which merchants use in their correspondence, and, under pretext of trying it, took a copy of M. de Fondegè's letter. Having done this, he placed the copy in an envelope addressed to the Marquis de Valorsay, and, with his heart relieved of all anxiety, posted it at the same time as the original letter. A few moments later he got into the cab in which he was stricken down with apoplexy."

Extraordinary as Pascal's explanations must have seemed to her, Marguerite did not doubt their accuracy in the least. "Then it is the copy of this letter which you saw in the possession of the Marquis de Valorsay?"

"Yes."

"And the original?"

"M. de Fondège alone can tell what has become of that. It is evident that he has somehow succeeded in obtaining possession of it. Would he have dared to squander money as he has done if he had not been convinced that there was no proof of his guilt in existence? Perhaps on hearing of the count's sudden death he bribed the concierge at the Hôtel de Chalusse to watch for this letter and return it to him. But on this subject I have only conjectures to offer. If they wish you to marry their son, it is probably because it seems too hard that you should be left in abject poverty while they are enjoying the fortune they have stolen from you. The vilest scoundrels have their scruples. Besides, a marriage with their son would protect them against any possible mischance in the future."

He was silent for a moment, and then more slowly resumed: "You see, Marguerite, we have clear, palpable, and irrefutable proofs of *your* innocence; but in my efforts to clear my own name of disgrace, I have been far less fortunate. I have tried in vain to collect material proofs of the conspiracy against me. It is only by proving the guilt of the Marquis de Valorsay and the Viscount de Coralth that I can establish my innocence, and so far I am powerless to do so."

Mademoiselle Marguerite's face brightened with supreme joy: "Then I can serve you, in my turn, my only love," she exclaimed. "Ah! blessed be God who inspired me, and who thus rewards me for an hour of courage. My poor father's plan also occurred to me, Pascal. Was it not strange? The material proof of your innocence which you have sought for in vain, is in my possession, written and signed by the Marquis de Valorsay. Like M. de Fondège, he believes that the letter which proves his guilt is annihilated. He burned it himself, and yet it exists." So saying, she drew from her bosom one of the copies which she had received from Carjat the photographer, and handed it to Pascal, adding, "Look!"

Pascal eagerly perused the marvellous fac-simile of the letter which the marquis had written to Madame Léon. "Ah! this is the scoundrel's death warrant," he exclaimed exultantly. And approaching Madame Ferailleur, who still stood leaning against the door, silent and motionless: "Look, mother," he repeated, "look!"

And he pointed to this paragraph which was so convincing and so explicit, that the most exacting jury would have asked for no further evi-

dence. "I have formed a plan which will completely efface all remembrance of that cursed P. F., in case any one could condescend to think of him, after the disgrace we fastened upon him the other evening at the house of Madame d'A——."

"Nor is this all," resumed Mademoiselle Marguerite. "There are other letters which will prove that this plot was the marquis's work and which give the name of his accomplice, Coralth. And these letters are in the possession of a man of dubious integrity, who was once the marquis's ally, but who has now become his enemy. He is known as Isidore Fortunat, and lives in the Place de la Bourse."

Marguerite felt that Madame Ferailleur's keen glance was riveted upon her. She intuitively divined what was passing in the mind of the puritanical old lady, and realised that her whole future, and the happiness of her entire wedded life, depended upon her conduct at that moment. So, desirous of making a full confession, she hastily exclaimed: "My conduct may have seemed strange in a young girl, Pascal. A timid, inexperienced girl, who had been carefully kept from all knowledge of life and evil, would have been crushed by such a burden of disgrace, and could only have wept and prayed. I did weep and pray; but I also struggled and fought. In the hour of peril I found myself endowed with some of the courage and energy which distinguished the poor women of the people among whom I formerly earned my bread. The teachings and miseries of the past were not lost to me!" And as simply as if she were telling the most natural thing in the world, she described the struggle she had undertaken against the world, strong in her faith in Pascal and in his love.

"Ah, you are a noble and courageous girl!" exclaimed Madame Ferailleur. "You are worthy of my son, and you will proudly guard our honest name!"

For some little time already the obstinate old lady had been struggling against the sympathetic emotion that filled her heart, and big tears were coursing down her wrinkled cheeks.

Unable to restrain herself any longer, she now threw both arms around Marguerite's neck, and drew her towards her in a long embrace, murmuring: "Marguerite, my daughter! Ah! how unjust my prejudices were!"

It might be thought that Pascal was transported with joy on hearing this: but no; the lines of care on his forehead deepened, as he said: "Happines is so near! Why must a final test, another humiliation, separate us from it?"

But Marguerite now felt strong enough to meet even martyrdom with a smile. "Speak, Pascal!" said she, "don't you see that it is almost ten o'clock?"

He hesitated; there was grief in his eyes and his breath came quick and hard, as he resumed: "For your sake and mine, we must conquer, at any price. This is the only reason that can justify the horrible expedient I have to suggest. M. de Valorsay, as you know, has boasted of his power to overcome your resistance, and he really believes that he possesses this power. Why I have not killed him again and again when he has been at my mercy, I can scarcely understand. The only thing that gave me power to restrain myself was my desire for as sure, as terrible, and as public a revenge as the humiliation he inflicted on me. His plan for your ruin is such as only a scoundrel like himself could conceive. With the assistance of his vile tool, Coralth, he has formed a league, offensive and defensive, with the son of the Count de Chalusse's sister, who is the only acknowledged heir at

this moment—a young man destitute of heart and intelligence, and inordinately vain, but neither better nor worse than many others who figure respectably in society. His name is Wilkie Gordon. The marquis has acquired great influence over him, and has persuaded him that it is his duty to denounce you to the authorities. He has, in short, accused you of defrauding the heirs of the Chalusse estate of two millions of francs and also of poisoning the count."

The girl shrugged her shoulders disdainfully. "As for the robbery, we have an answer to that," she answered, "and as regards the poisoning—really the accusation is too absurd!"

But Pascal still looked gloomy. "The matter is more serious than you suppose," he replied. "They have found a physician—a vile, cowardly scoundrel—who for a certain sum has consented to appear in support of the accusation."

"Dr. Jodon, I presume!"

"Yes; and this is not all. The count's escritoire contains the vial of medicine of which he drank a portion on the day of his death. Well, to-morrow night, Madame Léon will open the garden gate of the Hôtel de Chalusse and admit a rascal who will abstract the vial."

Marguerite shuddered. Now she understood the fiendish cunning of the plot. "It might ruin me!" she murmured.

Pascal nodded affirmatively. "M. de Valorsay wishes you to consider yourself as irretrievably lost, and then he intends to offer to save you on conditions that you consent to marry him. I should say, however, that M. Wilkie is ignorant of the atrocious projects he is abetting. They are known only to the marquis and M. de Coralth; and it is I who, under the name of Mauméjan, act as their adviser. It was to me that the marquis sent M. Wilkie for assistance in drawing up this accusation. I myself wrote out the denunciation, which was as terrible and as formidable as our bitterest enemy could possibly desire, combining, as it did, with perfidious art, the reports of the valets and the suspicions of the physician, and establishing the connection between the robbery and the murder. It finished by demanding a thorough investigation. And M. Wilkie copied and signed this document, and carried it to the prosecution office himself."

Mademoiselle Marguerite sank half-fainting into an arm-chair. "You have done this!" she faltered.

"It was necessary, my daughter," whispered Madame Ferailleur.

"Yes, it was necessary, absolutely necessary," repeated Pascal, "as you will see. Justice, which is a human institution, and limited in its powers, cannot fathom motives, read thoughts, or interfere with plans, however abominable they may be, or however near realization. Before it can interfere, the law must have material, tangible proof, convincing to the senses. Until you are arrested, the crimes committed by M. de Valorsay, and those associated with him, do not come within the reach of human justice; but as soon as you are in prison, I can hasten to our friend the justice of the peace, and we shall go at once to the investigating magistrate and explain everything. Now, when your innocence and the guilt of your accusers have been established, what do you fancy the authorities will do? They will wait until your enemies declare themselves, in order to capture them all at once, and prevent the escape of a single one. To-morrow night some clever detectives will watch the Hôtel de Chalusse, and just as Madame Léon and the wretch with her think themselves sure of success, they will be caught in the very act and arrested. When they are examined

by a magistrate, who is conversant with the whole affair, can they deny their guilt? No; certainly not. Acting upon their confession, the authorities will force an entrance into Valorsay's house, where they will find your father's will and the receipt given by M. de Fondège—in a word, all the proofs of their guilt. And while this search is going on, all your enemies, reassured by your arrest, will be at a grand *soirée* given by Baron Trigault. I shall be there as well."

Mademoiselle Marguerite had mastered her momentary weakness. She rose to her feet, and in a firm voice exclaimed: "You have acted rightly."

"Ah! there was no other way. And yet I wished to see you, to learn if this course were too repugnant to you."

She interrupted him with a gesture. "When shall I be arrested?" she asked, quietly.

"This evening or to-morrow," was his answer.

"Very well! I have only one request to make. The Fondèges have a son who has no hand in the affair, but who will be more severely punished than his parents, if we do not spare them. Could you not—"

"I can do nothing, Marguerite. I am powerless now."

Everything was soon arranged. Marguerite raised her forehead to Pascal for his parting kiss, and went away accompanied by Madame Ferailleur, who escorted her to the corner of the Rue Boursault. The General and his wife had returned home in advance of Marguerite. She found them sitting in the drawing-room, with distorted faces and teeth chattering with fear. With them was a bearded man who, as soon as she appeared, exclaimed:

"You are Mademoiselle Marguerite, are you not? I arrest you in the name of the law. There is my warrant." And without more ado he led her away.

XX.

Money, which now-a-days has taken the place of the good fairies of former times, had gratified M. Wilkie's every longing in a single night. Without any period of transition, dreamlike as it were, he had passed from what he called "straitened circumstances" to the splendid enjoyment of a princely fortune. Madame d'Argelès' renunciation had been so correctly drawn up, that as soon as he presented his claims and displayed his credentials he was placed in possession of the Chalusse estate. It is true that a few trifling difficulties presented themselves. For instance, the old justice of the peace who had affixed the seals refused to remove them from certain articles of furniture, especially from the late count's escritoire, without an order from the court, and several days were needed to obtain this. But what did that matter to M. Wilkie? The house, with its splendid reception-rooms, pictures, statuary and gardens, was at his disposal, and he installed himself therein at once. Twenty horses neighed and stamped in his stables: there were at least a dozen carriages in the coach-house. He devoted his attention exclusively to the horses and vehicles; but acting upon the advice of Casimir, who had become his valet and oracle, he retained all the former servants of the house, from Bourigeau the concierge down to the humblest scullery maid. Still, he gave them to understand that this was only a temporary arrangement. A man like himself, living in this progressive age, could scarcely be expected to content himself with what had satisfied the Count de Chalusse. "For I have my plans," he remarked to Casimir, "but let Paris wait awhile."

He repudiated his former friends. Costard and Serpillon, pretended viscounts though they were, were quite beneath the notice of a Gordon Chalusse, as M. Wilkie styled himself on his visiting cards. However, he purchased their share of Pompier de Nanterre, feeling convinced that this remarkable steeple chaser had a brilliant future before him. He did not trouble himself to any great extent about his mother. Like everyone else, he knew that she had disappeared, but nothing further. On the other hand, the thought of his father, the terrible *chevalier d'industrie*, hung over his joy like a pall; and each time the great entrance bell announced a visitor, he trembled, turned pale, and muttered: "Perhaps it's he!"

Tortured by this fear, he clung closely to the Marquis de Valorsay as if he felt that this distinguished friend was a powerful support. Besides, people of rank and distinction naturally exercised a powerful attraction over him, and he fancied he grew several inches taller when, in some public place, in the street, or a restaurant, he was able to call out, "I say, Valorsay, my good friend," or, "Upon my word! my dear marquis!"

M. de Valorsay received these effusions graciously enough, although, in point of fact, he was terribly bored by the platitudes of his new acquaintance. He intended to send him to Coventry later on, but just now M. Wilkie was too useful to be ignored. So he had introduced him to his club, and was seen with him everywhere—in the Bois, at the restaurants, and the theatres. At times, some of his friends inquired: "Who is that queer little fellow?" with a touch of irony in their tone, but when the marquis carelessly answered: "A poor devil who has just come into possession of a property worth twenty millions!" they became serious, and requested the pleasure and honour of an introduction to this fortunate young man.

So M. de Valorsay had invited Gordon Chalusse to accompany him to Baron Trigault's approaching *fête*. It was to be an entertainment for gentlemen only, a monster card-party; but every one knew the wealthy baron, and no doubt with a view of stimulating curiosity he had declared, and the *Figaro* had repeated, that he had a great surprise in store for his guests. Oh! such a surprise! They could have no idea what it was! This *fête* was to take place on the second day after Mademoiselle Marguerite's arrest; and on the appointed evening, between nine and ten o'clock, M. de Valorsay and his friend Coralth sat together in the former's smoking room waiting for Wilkie to call for them, as had been agreed upon. They were both in the best of spirits. The viscount's apprehensions had been entirely dispelled; and the marquis had quite forgotten the twinges of pain in his injured limb. "Marguerite will only leave prison to marry me," said M. de Valorsay, triumphantly; and he added: "What a willing tool this Wilkie is! A single word sufficed to make him give all his servants leave of absence. The Hôtel de Chalusse will be deserted, and Madame Léon and Vantrasson can operate at their leisure."

It was ten o'clock when M. Wilkie made his appearance. "Come, my good friends!" said he, "my carriage is below."

They started off at once, and five minutes later they were ushered into the presence of Baron Trigault, who received M. Wilkie as if he had never seen him before. There was quite a crowd already. At least three or four hundred people had assembled in the Baron's reception-rooms, and among them were several former *habitués* of Madame d'Argelès' house; one could also espy M. de Fondège ferociously twirling his moustaches as usual, together with Kami-Bey, who was conspicuous by reason of his portly form and eternal red fez. However, among these men, all noticeable for their

studied elegance of attire and manner, and all of them known to M. de Valorsay, there moved numerous others of very different appearance. Their waistcoats were less open, and their clothes did not fit them as perfectly; on the other hand, there was something else than a look of idiotic self-complacency on their faces. "Who can these people be?" whispered the marquis to M. de Coralth. "They look like lawyers or magistrates." But although he said this he did not really believe it, and it was without the slightest feeling of anxiety that he strolled from group to group, shaking hands with his friends and introducing M. Wilkie.

A strange rumour was in circulation among the guests. Many of them declared—where could they have heard such a thing?—that in consequence of a quarrel with her husband, Madame Trigault had left Paris the evening before. They even went so far as to repeat her parting words to the Baron: "You will never see me again," she had said. "You are amply avenged. Farewell!" However, the best informed among the guest, the folks who were thoroughly acquainted with all the scandals of the day, declared the story false, and said that if the baroness had really fled, handsome Viscount de Coralth would not appear so calm and smiling.

The report *was* true, however. But M. de Coralth did not trouble himself much about the baroness now. Had he not got in his pocket M. Wilkie's signature insuring him upwards of half a million? Standing near one of the windows in the main reception-room, between the Marquis de Valorsay and M. Wilkie, the brilliant viscount was gaily chatting with them, when a footman, in a voice loud enough to interrupt all conversation, suddenly announced: "M. Mauméjan!"

It seemed such a perfectly natural thing to M. de Valorsay that Mauméjan, as one of the baron's business agents, should be received at his house, that he was not in the least disturbed. But M. de Coralth, having heard the name, wished to see the man who had aided and advised the marquis so effectually. He abruptly turned, and as he did so the words he would have spoken died upon his lips. He became livid, his eyes seemed to start from their sockets, and it was with difficulty that he ejaculated: "He!"

"Who?" inquired the astonished marquis.

"Look!"

M. de Valorsay did so, and to his utter amazement he perceived a numerous party in the rear of the man announced under the name of Maumèjan. First came Mademoiselle Marguerite, leaning on the arm of the white-haired magistrate, and then Madame Ferailleur; next M. Isidore Fortunat, and finally Chupin—Victor Chupin, resplendent in a handsome, bran-new, black dress-suit.

The marquis could no longer fail to understand the truth. He realized who Maumèjan really was, and the audacious comedy he had been duped by. He was so frightfully agitated that five or six persons sprang forward exclaiming: "What is the matter, marquis? Are you ill?" But he made no reply. He felt that he was caught in a trap, and he glanced wildly around him seeking for some loop-hole of escape.

However, the word of command had evidently been given. Suddenly all the guests scattered about the various drawing-rooms poured into the main hall, and the doors were closed. Then, with a solemnity of manner which no one had ever seen him display before, Baron Trigault took the so-called Mauméjan by the hand and led him into the centre of the apartment opposite the lofty chimney-piece. "Gentlemen," he began, in a commanding tone, "this is M. Pascal Ferailleur, the honourable man who was

falsely accused of cheating at cards at Madame d'Argelès' house. You owe him a hearing."

Pascal was greatly agitated. The strangeness of the situation, the certainty of speedy and startling rehabilitation, perhaps the joy of vengeance, the silence, which was so profound that he could hear his own panting breath, and the many eyes riveted upon him, all combined to unnerve him. But only for a moment. He swiftly conquered his weakness, and surveying his audience with flashing eyes, he explained, in a clear and ringing voice, the shameful conspiracy to obtain possession of the count's millions, and the abominable machinations by which Mademoiselle Marguerite and himself had been victimized. Then when he had finished his explanations he added, in a still more commanding voice, "Now look; you can read the culprits' guilt on their faces. One is the scoundrel known to you as the Viscount de Coralth, but Paul Violaine is his true name. He was formerly an accomplice of the notorious Mascarot; he is a cowardly villain, for he is married, and leaves his wife and children to die of starvation!" The Viscount de Coralth fairly bellowed with rage. But Pascal did not heed him. "The other criminal is the Marquis de Volarsay," he added, in the same ringing tone. There was, moreover, a third culprit who would have inspired mingled pity and disgust if any one had noticed him shrinking into a corner, terrified and muttering: "It wasn't my fault, my wife compelled me to do it!" This was General de Fondège.

Pascal did not mention his name. But it was not absolutely necessary he should do so, and besides, he remembered Marguerite's entreaty respecting the son.

However, while the young lawyer was speaking, the marquis had summoned all his energy and assurance to his aid. Desperate as his plight might be, he would not surrender. "This is an infamous conspiracy," he exclaimed. "Baron, you shall atone for this. The man's an impostor! —he lies!—all that he says is false!"

"Yes, it is false!" echoed M. de Coralth.

But a clamour arose, drowning these protestations, and the most opprobrious epithets could be heard on ever side.

"How will you prove your assertion?" cried M. de Valorsay.

"Don't try that dodge on us!" shouted Chupin. "Vantrasson and mother Léon have confessed everything."

"Who defrauded us all with Domingo?" cried several people; and, loud above all the others, Kami-Bey bawled out: "To say nothing of the fact that the sale of your racing stud was a complete swindle!"

Meanwhile, Pascal's former friends and associates, his brother advocates and the magistrates who had listened to his first efforts at the bar, crowded round him, pressing his hands, embracing him almost to suffocation, censuring themselves for having suspected him, the very soul of honour, and pleading in self-justification the degenerate age in which we live—an age in which we daily see those whom we had considered immaculate suddenly yield to temptation. And a murmur of respectful admiration rose from the throng when the excitement had subsided a little, and the guests had an opportunity to observe Mademoiselle Marguerite, whose eyes sparkled more brightly than ever through her happy tears; and whose beauty acquired an almost sublime expression from her deep emotion.

The wretched Valorsay felt that all was over—that he was irretrievably lost. Seized by a blind fury like that which impels a hunted animal to turn and face the hounds that pursue him, and bid them defiance, he con-

fronted the throng with his face distorted with passion, his eyes bloodshot, and foam upon his lips; he was absolutely frightful in his cynicism, hatred, and scorn. "Ah! well, yes!" he exclaimed—"yes, all that you have just heard is true. I was sinking, and I tried to save myself as best I could. Beggars cannot be choosers; I staked my all upon a single die. If I had won, you would have been at my feet; but I have lost and you spurn me. Cowards! hypocrites! that you are, insult me if you like, but tell me how many among you all are sufficiently pure and upright to have a right to despise me! Are there a hundred among you? are there even fifty?"

A tempest of hisses momentarily drowned his voice, but as soon as the uproar had ceased, he resumed, sneeringly: "Ah! the truth wounds you, my dear friends. Pray don't pretend to be so distressingly virtuous! I was ruined—that is the long and short of it. But what man of you is not embarrassed? Who among you finds his income sufficient? Which one of you is not encroaching upon his capital? And when you have come to your last louis, you will do what I have done, or something worse. Do not deny it, for not one among you has a more uncompromising conscience, more moral firmness, or more generous aspirations than I once possessed. You are pursuing what I pursued. You desire what I desired—a life of luxury, brief if it must be, but happy—a life of gaiety, wild excitement, and dissipation. You, too, have a passion for pleasure and gambling, race-horses, and notorious women, a table always bountifully spread, glasses ever over-flowing with wine, all the delights of luxury, and everything that gratifies your vanity! But an abyss of shame awaits you at the end of it all. I am in it now. I await you there, for there you will surely, necessarily, inevitably come. Ah, ha! you will not then think my downfall so very strange. Let me pass! make way! if you please."

He advanced with his head haughtily erect, and would actually have made his escape if a frightened servant had not at that moment appeared, crying: "Monsieur—Monsieur le Baron! a commissary of police is downstairs. He is coming up. He has a warrant!"

The marquis's frenzied assurance deserted him. He turned even paler than he already was if that were possible, and reeled like an ox but partially stunned by the butcher's hammer. Suddenly a desperate resolution could be read in his eyes, the resolution of the condemned criminal, who, knowing that he cannot escape the scaffold, ascends it with a firm step.

He hastily approached Baron Trigault, and asked in a husky voice: "Will you allow me to be arrested in your house, baron? me—a Valorsay!"

It might have been supposed that the baron had expected this reproach, for without a word he led the marquis and M. de Coralth to a little room at the end of the hall, pushed them inside, and closed the door again.

It was time he did so, for the commissary of police was already upon the threshold. "Which of you gentlemen is the Marquis de Valorsay?" he asked. "Which of you is Paul Violaine, *alias* the Viscount de—"

The sharp report of fire-arms suddenly interrupted him. Every one at once rushed to the little room, where the wretched men had been conducted. There extended, face upwards, on the floor, lay the Marquis de Valorsay, with his brains oozing from his fractured skull, and his right hand still clutching a revolver. He was dead. "And the other!" cried the throng; "the other!"

The open window, and a curtain rudely torn from its fastenings and secured to the balustrade, told how M. de Coralth had made his escape. It was not till later that people learned what precautions the baron had taken.

On the table in that room he had laid two revolvers, and two packages containing ten thousand francs each. The viscount had not hesitated.

* * * * * * *

Pascal Ferailleur and Mademoiselle Marguerite de Chalusse were married at the church of Saint Etienne du Mont, only a few steps from the Rue d'Ulm. Those who knew the mystery connected with the bride's parentage were greatly astonished when they saw Baron Trigault act as a witness on this occasion, in company with the venerable justice of the peace. But such was the fact, nevertheless. Treated more and more outrageously by his daughter and her husband, separated from his wife, who had nearly lost her reason, although her letters were saved, the baron has now-a-days found affection and a home with Pascal and his wife. He plays cards but seldom now—only an occasional game of *piquet* with Madame Ferailleur, and he amuses himself by making her start when she is too long in discarding, by ejaculating, in a stentorian voice: "We are wasting precious time!" Sometimes they go out together, to the great astonishment of such as chance to meet the puritanical old lady leaning on the baron's arm. She often goes to visit and console the widow Gordon, formerly known as Lia d'Argelès, who now keeps an establishment near Montrouge, where she provides poor betrayed and forsaken girls with a home and employment. She has yet to receive any token of remembrance from her son. As for her husband, she supposes he is dead or incarcerated in some prison.

It is to Madame Gordon that the Fondèges are often indebted for bread. Obliged to disgorge their plunder, and left with no resources save the fifty francs a month allowed them by their son, who has been promoted to the rank of captain, their poverty is necessarily extreme. Oh! those Fondèges! M. Fortunat only speaks of them with horror. But he is loud in his praises of Madame Marguerite, who repaid him the forty thousand francs he had advanced to M. de Valorsay. He speaks in the highest terms of Chupin also; but in this, he is scarcely sincere, for Victor, who has been set up in business by Pascal, told him very plainly that he was determined not to put his hand to any more dirty work, and that expression, "dirty work," rankles in M. Fortunat's heart.

Chupin's resolution did not, however, prevent him from attending the trial of Vantrasson and Madame Léon—the former of whom was sentenced to hard labour for life, and the latter to ten years' imprisonment. Nothing is known concerning M. de Coralth; but his wife has disappeared, to the great disappointment of M. Mouchon. As a dentist, Dr. Jodon is successful. As for M. Wilkie, you can learn anything you wish to know concerning him in the newspapers, for his sayings, doings, and movements, are constantly being chronicled. The reporters exhaust all the resources of their vocabulary in describing his horses, carriages, and stables, and the gorgeous liveries of his servants. His changes of residence are always mentioned; his brilliant sayings are quoted. He is a social success; he is admired, fondled, and flattered. He makes a great stir in the fashionable world—in fact he reigns over it like a king. After all, assurance is the winning card in the game of life!

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